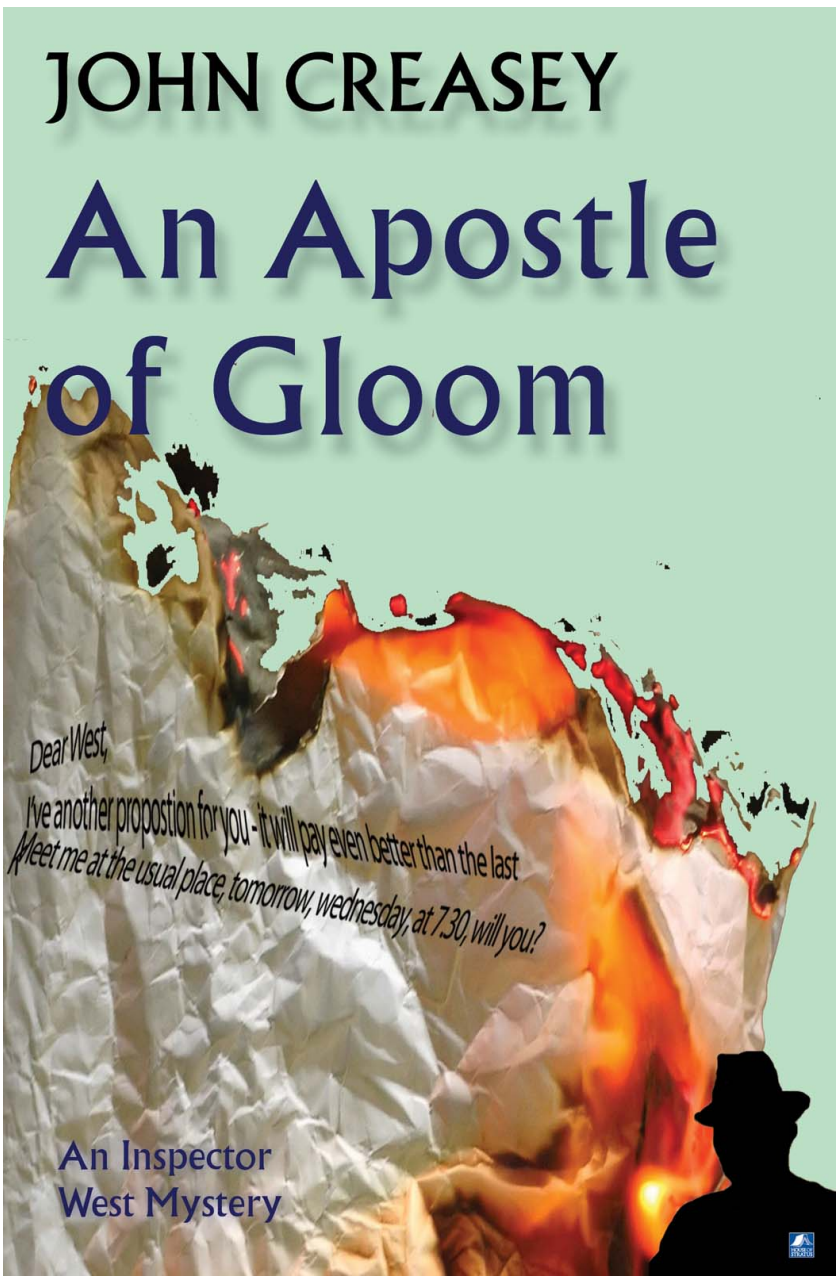
JOHN CREASEY

An Apostle of Gloom


Dear West,
I've another proposition for you - it will pay even better than the last
Meet me at the usual place, tomorrow, wednesday, at 7.30, will you?

An Inspector West Mystery

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An Apostle of Gloom

(Inspector West at Home)

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About the Author

John Creasey – Master Storyteller - was born in Surrey, England in 1908 into a poor family in which there were nine children, John Creasey grew up to be a true master story teller and international sensation. His more than 600 crime, mystery and thriller titles have now sold 80 million copies in 25 languages. These include many popular series such as *Gideon of Scotland Yard, The Toff, Dr Palfrey and The Baron*.

Creasy wrote under many pseudonyms, explaining that booksellers had complained he totally dominated the 'C' section in stores. They included:

> *Gordon Ashe, M E Cooke, Norman Deane, Robert Caine Frazer, Patrick Gill, Michael Halliday, Charles Hogarth, Brian Hope, Colin Hughes, Kyle Hunt, Abel Mann, Peter Manton, J J Marric, Richard Martin, Rodney Mattheson, Anthony Morton and Jeremy York.*

Never one to sit still, Creasey had a strong social conscience, and stood for Parliament several times, along with founding the *One Party Alliance* which promoted the idea of government by a coalition of the best minds from across the political spectrum.

He also founded the *British Crime Writers' Association*, which to this day celebrates outstanding crime writing. *The Mystery Writers of America* bestowed upon him the *Edgar Award* for best novel and then in 1969 the ultimate *Grand Master Award*. John Creasey's stories are as compelling today as ever.

Chapter 1

ROGER WEST HAS A DAY OFF

Superintendent Abbott inserted his tall figure and expressionless face into the narrow opening of the door of the Chief Inspectors' office on B Floor at New Scotland Yard. Abbott seemed never to enter a door in natural fashion, but to slide in as if he were anxious to be unobserved.

When Roger West, who was in the office with Chief Inspector Eddie Day, looked up and saw the vacant face of the Superintendent, his heart dropped. For weeks he had schemed to take this particular day off, because it was his wife's birthday, but he had been pessimistic until, when he had arrived an hour before, he had found a note from Abbott on his desk, telling him that he need only give details of one or two reports and could then go off. Consequently Roger had irritated Eddie Day by humming gaily, although it was a dull, grey day, with early April making a passable imitation of late November; lights were burning over the desks farthest from the windows.

Seeing Abbott, Roger jumped to the conclusion that the earlier release was going to be countermanded. At the Yard they called Abbott the Apostle of Gloom, for he was invariably the bearer of evil tidings, which perhaps accounted for his cold, vacuous appearance.

Eddie Day was unkind enough to look up, push his chair back, and grin widely in anticipation of the coming edict. Eddie was not a handsome man and when he grinned he showed most of his prominent front teeth.

"Oh, West," said Abbott, further deepening Roger's gloom, "will you be at home this afternoon?"

Roger looked puzzled. "I expect so, yes."

"Can you make sure that you will be in?" demanded Abbott.

"Yes," said Roger, automatically. "I had thought of doing a show with my wife, but that wouldn't be until this evening." Abbott was not a man with whom it was wise to take liberties, since he was fully conscious of his seniority, but Roger added somewhat forlornly: "You're not doing to drag me back, are you?"

"I just wanted to be sure where I could find you," Abbott told him, and promptly effaced himself, closing the door without a sound.

Eddie, who disliked the Superintendent, made a *volte face* with engaging charm.

"What a ruddy nerve!" he declared. "Trying to put you in a fix so's you don't know what you can do. Too bad, I call it. I'll tell you what, Handsome, take Janet out and let Abbott get someone else to chase round after him, that's what *I'd* do if I was you." Eddie, who was a shrewd officer, and at his particular job – the detection of forgery – head and shoulders above anyone else at the Yard, still looked and talked like a detective-sergeant newly promoted from a beat. "Cold as a fish, that's what I always think the Apostle

is – if you stuck a pin in him he wouldn't jump." Eddie considered this and grinned, boyishly. "I wouldn't mind trying!" he added, then frowned at the expression on Roger's face. "Say, what's biting you, Handsome? You look as if you've eaten something that don't agree with you."

"Er—oh, it's nothing," said Roger, sounding aggrieved. "He might have given me one day without wanting me on tap." He shrugged, locked his desk and took his hat and mackintosh from a hat-stand. "Head him off for me if you can, Eddie."

"Trust me," said Eddie. "I won't let you down. Give my love to Janet!"

His loud laughter echoed in Roger's ears as he went out, closing the door, and walked thoughtfully along the passage. He found it hard to explain why Abbott's questions had affected him so deeply and tried to get rid of the feeling of depression which the brief visit had engendered. He did not brighten up, however, until he had booked two stalls for *Arsenic and Old Lace,* to which he had wanted to take Janet for several months. Next, he visited an Oxford Street store and parted with many coupons, before leaving with a brown paper parcel under his arm for which he had thoughtfully supplied the paper.

A soft drizzle of rain, a mist which threatened to become a fog, and a sky of a uniform dull grey did not further depress him as he contemplated an afternoon in front of a log fire after a good lunch at a small hotel in Chelsea where he knew he would get a warm welcome. He had telephoned Janet and when he reached his small detached house in Bell Street, Chelsea, she was waiting in the lounge, dressed for out-of-doors in a gaily coloured mackintosh. She saw him reach the gate and when he entered she was tucking in a few stray curls of her dark hair beneath a wide-brimmed felt hat.

He saw her reflection in the mirror over the mantelpiece. It was a reflection worth looking at, for she was comely, her eyes were glowing, and her colour was not all out of a box. She turned swiftly and raised her arms, inviting appraisal.

"Will I do, darling?"

Slowly, Roger – who was worthy of his nickname, 'Handsome' – looked her up and down. As slowly, he began to smile; the gleam in his eyes brought a faint flush to Janet's cheeks and an added sparkle to her eyes.

"You ass!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, you'll do," declared Roger, still smiling, "although why we want to go out is past my understanding. I'd much rather"—he broke off and tossed the package to her—"catch!"

"What—" she began, and then as she caught the package she came to him and kissed him. "I thought we said 'no presents, only lunch and dinner and a show'," she said. "I—Roger, you haven't got to go back?"

He laughed at her sudden alarm. "No, not as far as I know – it's not a peace-offering!"

Yet as she opened the present he wished that she had not reminded him of the Yard. Abbott's expression – or lack of it – lingered in his mind and did

not go immediately, even when Janet exclaimed with pleasure at the sight of a set of peach-coloured lingerie, lace-trimmed and absurdly flimsy. Three days before, when they had passed the Oxford Street store, a similar set had been in the window at a fantastic price apart from the ever-present problem of coupons. Janet had wished, a little wistfully, that coupons were not necessary – her things *were* getting the worse for wear.

"I just mustn't speak of inner yearnings when we're out," she said, as she fingered the silk. "I didn't dream you'd remember, Roger – they're *exactly* what I would have wished for! You—"

She dropped the flimsies on a table and – a few minutes later, with his hair slightly rumpled and faint smears of lipstick on his lips and cheeks – he had completely forgotten Abbott.

Throughout the meal at the hotel some ten minutes' walk from the house, they talked of unimportant trifles. Not until the end of it, when they were in the lounge drinking coffee and Roger could see into the street, did a frown darken his face.

"What's the matter?" asked Janet.

"Oh, nothing," said Roger, hastily.

"Darling," declared Janet, "you can probably deceive all the criminals in the world but it's no use lying to me. What did you see?" She looked a trifle anxious, just as she had done when she had asked whether he might have to go back to the Yard.

"Now, would I lie to you?" demanded Roger, shocked. "It's nothing, sweet – I caught a glimpse of Tiny Martin outside and I'm wondering why he's about here, he's been on a job at Bethnal Green."

"Who's Tiny Martin?" demanded Janet.

"Abbott's sergeant," said Roger. "Let's forget him."

But Martin was not so easily forgotten. He was a tall, thin, cadaverous-looking man who always worked with Abbott and had something of the Superintendent's strange coldness; he was no more popular than Abbott and his reputation for creating gloom was equally notorious. Abbott did the unpleasant things, such as cancelling holidays and conveying the news of reprimands and sometimes loss of seniority; Martin carried his messages.

In spite of the drizzle, Roger and Janet sauntered along the Chelsea Embankment for twenty minutes before going back to Bell Street. Twice Roger caught a glimpse of the sergeant, although he did not tell Janet, who had completely forgotten Martin and was busy speculating on Roger's chances of getting a month's holiday soon after the war was over, so that they could go abroad. Roger entered into the spirit of the dream and they were still discussing it when they reached the house. He thought that he caught a glimpse of Martin at the end of the road, but dismissed the idea and hurried indoors, lighting the fire while Janet went upstairs to change. Yet he was preoccupied, and when she came down wearing a dressing-gown and, she revealed a moment later, the luxury garments he had bought her, he was taken completely by surprise. He stood looking at her with unfeigned admiration.

All thought of Abbott and Martin was driven out of his mind and he had even forgotten that Abbott had virtually told him to stay indoors when, over tea – with Janet dressed now in a navy suit – he sat back in an easy chair and told himself that he was both a happy man and a lucky one. He looked a little drawn – Janet knew that he was tired and that overwork explained it – but although there was a tinge of grey at his temples he looked absurdly young to be a Chief Inspector at the Yard. Their closest friend, Mark Lessing, frequently declared that Roger amazed him, so rarely in his experience did good looks and a keen mind go together.

"What time must we leave?" Janet asked.

"We shouldn't start later than five," said Roger, "the curtain rises at a quarter to six and I don't suppose we'll be able to get a cab." He reached out for his cup and then sat upright, hearing footsteps on the front path. The lounge was at the front of the house.

The footsteps were heavy and deliberate.

"Darling, what is the matter with you?" demanded Janet. "It's, probably the laundryman, he usually comes about four o'clock and these days he won't go round the back." She stood up and put the lid over a dish of toasted crumpets and hurried to the front door. Roger glanced towards the hall, not knowing himself why he felt so worked up, until he heard Abbott's familiar voice.

"Good afternoon," said the Superintendent, "is Inspector West in, please?"

"Yes, he's at home," said Janet, her flat voice reflecting the keenness of her disappointment.

"Thank you. Ask him to be good enough to spare me a few minutes, please," said Abbott. "I am Superintendent Abbott of New Scotland Yard."

"Yes, I know," said Janet.

Had it been anyone else, she would have protested that it was not fair to call at such a time, but Roger imagined, as he smiled somewhat ruefully, that Abbott's manner had affected her as it did so many people. She asked the Superintendent into the hall and then came to tell Roger, who was standing up and sipping his tea. She drew near and whispered: "You heard who it was. Shall I ask him in here?"

"Yes, you'd better," said Roger, reluctantly.

"I suppose I'll have to offer him some tea," said Janet. She made a *moue* and then went out into the hall again, but she sounded brighter as she invited Abbott to come into the lounge. Roger did not quite know why he had allowed her to return for Abbott, nor why this visit, allied to the earlier interview and the way Martin had haunted him, seemed so ominous. He did know that he was not altogether surprised when Abbott said distantly: "It is a private matter, Mrs. West, I would rather see him alone."

Roger went into the small hall and looked at the Superintendent with a smile which could not be called inviting.

"Oh, hallo," he said, "now what's the trouble? Wouldn't a phone call have done as well?" He was on surer ground in his home than at the Yard and saw no reason why he should conceal the fact that he felt the visit

unnecessary. Before Abbott answered, Roger saw Detective-Sergeant Martin standing by the gate, his glum face looking gloomier because it was now raining hard and drops were falling from the turned-down brim of his trilby. Roger frowned and added more sharply: "What is it?"

Deliberately, Abbott wiped his feet on the door-mat and shook the rain from his hat into the porch before putting it on the hall-stand. Janet closed the door. Abbott did not take off his mackintosh as he said: "I'd like a word with you, West, alone." He shot a meaning glance at Janet who, bewildered, turned quickly and went into the lounge. Frowning, Roger led the way to the dining- room. He stood aside for Abbott to pass and the Superintendent sidled into the room.

Roger was not only curious about the visit but puzzled by Abbott's insistence on it being a 'private' matter; had he said 'official' it would have been more understandable. He waited while Abbott regarded him with narrowed eyes; he was a spare man with a curiously fleshless face and lips which were almost colourless.

"Well, get on with it, for the love of Mike!" said Roger, letting exasperation get the better of his discretion.

"I think you know why I've called," said Abbott.

"I don't," Roger retorted, "but I hope it won't take long. Is it the Micklejohn case?"

"It is not," Abbott said, enunciating each word carefully. "West, I don't want to make this more unpleasant than I have to. You know why I've come and this attitude won't help you."

Roger stared. "Attitude?" he echoed. "If you mean a reasonable annoyance at being pestered when I'm off duty—"

"I mean nothing of the kind," said Abbott, and sighed as if whatever he had to say was extremely distasteful. "If you are going to persist in being obtuse, West, there is nothing else I can do about it. I've come, of course, to search your house."

Roger looked at him stupidly. "You've come to—" he began, then found himself out on the point of echoing the other's words and stopped abruptly. He was no longer exasperated or worried but was simply puzzled. "I wish you'd tell me what all this is about," he said, "it's got past the joking stage."

Abbott pushed his hand into his coat and, after some fumbling, drew out a folded slip of paper. There was something familiar about it to Roger and the impression of familiarity increased when he saw Abbott unfold it; it was an official search warrant. Even when it was upside down he recognised the flourishes of the signature of Sir Guy Chatworth, the Assistant Commissioner at the Yard, but until he had read it he did not really believe that it authorised Abbott to search *his* house. When the truth did sink in, he drew in a deep breath, dropped the warrant on the dining-table and said sharply: "Abbott, I think you owe me some kind of explanation. I have no idea why this should have happened nor what it's about."

Abbott did not immediately answer and Roger was about to press for details when he heard a second knock at the front door and Janet's footsteps

followed. He paid little attention to what was happening outside, but looked into Abbott's narrowed eyes and tried to quieten the quick beating of his heart.

Chapter 2

A POLICEMAN UNDER A SHADOW

"It is not a pleasant task for me to present this warrant and I think you should stop pretending that you know nothing about it," said Abbott, with an obvious effort.

"I tell you—" began Roger.

"Hallo, Jan!" cried a voice from the hall and Roger recognised the deep tones of Mark Lessing. Abbott was so surprised that he looked towards the door and Mark continued in a booming voice: "How's the little birthday party going?" He stopped, there was a muffled gasp and then, in a rather weak voice, Janet said: "Mark, you ass!"

"Now what is a kiss between friends on a birthday?" demanded Lessing. "Especially on the twenty-first – it *is* your twenty-first, isn't it?" In different circumstances Roger would have welcomed the wide smile he knew to be on his friend's often sober countenance and the gaiety in the clear brown eyes. "Besides, I've brought you a present, a piece of Seèvres." He went on talking, but his voice was muffled. At last Janet was forced to raise hers, but that too was indistinct; obviously she had taken Mark into the lounge.

Abbott pinched his nostrils. "Well, West?" he said.

Roger eyed him levelly and thanked the fates for sending Mark Lessing so opportunely. A few moments before he would have answered angrily and that would only have worsened the situation; Mark had given him time to realise that he would be wise to adopt a reasoning attitude. There was some absurd mistake, but it could be rectified and, rather than antagonise the Superintendent, he should try to create a good impression.

So he smiled and spoke steadily.

"I haven't anything to say about it, Abbott, except that I'm completely at a loss – seriously," he added with a smile intended to be friendly but which became set when Abbott continued to stare at him, showing no sign of relaxing his cold hostility. "You must have some reason for getting a warrant sworn for me, but—"

"You *must* know the reason," said Abbott.

Roger fancied that there was a slight easing of his manner, the faint emphasis on the 'must' implied a query. He was about to follow it up when there came from the lounge an astonishing sound – astonishing because of the quiet which had reigned until then. It was the deep, throbbing bass notes of the piano, and then it developed into Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C sharp minor, played to get the utmost volume of sound and reverberating through the little house and probably audible half-way along the street. Hardly had it started than Mark began to sing, more loudly than harmoniously; a suspicion entered Roger's mind that Mark was drunk. Yet he was an

abstemious man as a rule, a fair judge of wine who rarely touched beer or spirits.

"Is that din necessary?" Abbott demanded, irritably.

"Is any of this necessary?" demanded Roger, somewhat tartly. "I thought I was going to have a day off, and I ought to leave soon, I'm taking my wife to a show, as I told you. Are you serious about executing this warrant?"

"Of course I am serious," said Abbott, "and I shall require you to—"

"Why did you get it?" demanded Roger.

He had to raise his voice to make himself heard for Mark had the bit properly between his teeth. Now and again he crashed a wrong note and he was playing so heavily that the piano frame was quivering and groaning. At odd intervals his singing grew audible and introduced a note of absurdity which exasperated Roger and yet seemed to relieve the tension about him.

"If you will stop that noise," said Abbott, "I can tell you." He stepped to the door and, no matter how reluctantly, Roger had to go with him. When it was open, the whole house seemed to be in uproar, and he thought that he heard a bump upstairs.

Then he pushed open the lounge door.

Janet was by the mantelpiece, doubled-up with laughter – and that was hardly surprising, for Mark was playing with idiotic abandon. As he crashed his hands on the keys he shook his head and his dark hair fell over his forehead; after each note he raised his hand high into the air, flexing his wrist. His pale face was flushed and his eyes were aglow with the 'inspiration' of his playing. He was no longer singing.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" Roger demanded, striding across the room and putting a hand on Mark's shoulder. "Stop it, you ass!" He pulled, but Mark continued, turning his head and shaking it vigorously. *Boom!* went the C sharp and then Mark played a run superbly. *Boom!* went the A, then G sharp, then C again.

"West, I insist that you stop this nonsense!" cried Abbott.

Boom! went Mark, and then he took his hands from the keys and swung round on the piano stool, flinging his hair out of his eyes and glaring into Abbott's face. Roger had never seen him look so toweringly angry; his earlier fear of Mark's sobriety strengthened.

"Nonsense?" Mark barked at Abbott. "Who are you, sir? What do you mean by calling my playing *nonsense*? If you have no appreciation of good music, if your ignorance is so abysmal, I advise you, most emphatically, *not* to declare it to the world. Nonsense indeed! Is *this* what you would term a thing which has no meaning?" He swung round to the piano again, raised his hands and then began to play Liszt's "Liebestraume".

Abbott stared at him, tight-lipped. Roger, at first irritated by Janet's laughter – she was still struggling with it – looked at her with a frown and then saw an expression in her eyes which gave him his first inkling that she knew why Mark was playing the fool and told him that it was not a question of inebriation. She began to laugh again as if she were unable to stop, and Abbott looked about him desperately; Roger thought he formed the word

‘madhouse.’ He did shout loudly enough to be heard above the playing: “Stop him, West!”

Roger tried, but only half-heartedly. There was a question in his mind, caused first by Janet’s expression, then by the realisation that if Mark were making this din deliberately, it could only be as a distraction. But from what did he want to distract attention? He remembered, suddenly, imagining that he had heard a bump upstairs. His confusion grew worse but he began to make a good show of losing his temper, until Mark desisted at last and rose, disdainfully, from the piano. He brushed his hair back from his forehead and straightened his tie – and then he jumped, as if horrified.

By no means handsome, he was a distinguished-looking man with a high forehead, an indubitably Roman nose and a pointed chin; his lips were shapely and his complexion so good that it was almost feminine. About him there was an air, normally, of arrogance.

Just then his whole expression was of horror.

“My sainted Cousin Lot!” he exclaimed. “Abbott! Why the dickens didn’t someone tell me? I say, Abbott, I *am* sorry, I’d no idea it was you.” He continued to stare into the Superintendent’s eyes while uttering abject apologies. Since he was not a policeman they were rather excessive; on the other hand, he was known at the Yard as a friend of Handsome West’s who dabbled in crime and, when not fully occupied by the Ministry of Information, where he worked, wrote crime case-books and treatises; he was not widely known but was respected for his analytical precision and his inventiveness. “You know, Abbott,” he went on in the same shocked tones, “I was absolutely carried away, I’ve been working rather hard and I just felt like getting on that piano and letting myself go. Something powerful in the way of urges, I suppose. And,” he added irrelevantly, “it’s Janet’s birthday. I remembered it this afternoon and came rushing over to apologise for not having wished her many happy returns and all that. If times were normal,” he added, catching a glimpse of the tea-table, “there would be an iced cake! Ah, me, what times they were when we could feed, and for coupons and points there was no need! I say, Jan, could you rustle up a cup of tea and a biscuit?”

“Of course,” said Janet, smiling so sweetly upon Abbott that had Roger not already suspected that she knew what was behind Mark’s astonishing performance, he would have done so then. “Won’t you stay to tea, Superintendent?”

Abbott had listened to Mark’s protestations of regret with a face gradually resuming its stony aspect. Now he turned to Janet and, to do him justice, he appeared ill at ease. Roger contributed to his embarrassment by offering him a cigarette.

“Don’t get worried, Abbott,” he said, “all this will work itself out, you know. Why don’t you have a cup of tea and talk about it?”

“Hallo, what’s this?” demanded Mark. “Sticky business on the criminal stakes? Famous member of the Big Five flummoxed, Handsome West called in to get his nose on the trail?” Mark beamed about him.

"You're not going to take Roger away!" Janet said swiftly, and Abbott had the grace to cough in confusion.

Roger put him out of his misery.

"Not in the usual way, Jan, anyhow." He smiled as if he were beginning to see the funny side of the situation. "I don't know what's gone wrong, but he's turned up with a search-warrant – I must be credited with having broken open a till."

"What?" gasped Mark.

"What?" cried Janet.

Roger thought that they put in just a shade more emphasis than was needed for true realism, although he might have gained that impression because he felt so sure that there was something afoot between them; he had not yet grappled with the problem of what it might be.

Abbott appeared to think their amazement understandable and sincere; he coughed again.

"You can't be serious!" exclaimed Janet.

"I am afraid I am, Mrs. West," said Abbott, "and I really must not waste any more time." He shot a quick, almost furtive glance at Roger and went on: "Information has been lodged to the effect that you received, today, a sum of money as a bribe. West, in consideration of withholding official action when you knew that such action was demanded."

Roger stared at him, blankly.

"Now, come, let's be serious," said Mark, "a joke is a joke and I like one with any man, but this—"

"It is not a joking matter," Abbott assured him, coldly, "it is quite serious and, but for the circumstances, I would not have made the statement in this room. However, you appear to wish your wife to know, West, so that is your responsibility."

Janet stepped to Roger's side and asked, clearly: "Is he sane, Roger?"

Roger smiled, thinly. "Yes, he has a warrant, but it's coming to something when he adopts this method instead of tackling me at the Yard. I suppose he could have come while I was out instead of while I'm here, but apparently that's the extent of the consideration I can expect." He seemed faintly amused. "It's all so fantastic that it's not worth getting worked up about. It explains why Martin was dogging me, too," he added, looking at Janet, "he's probably been making sure I didn't pass the swag on to anyone else!"

Abbott regarded him coldly.

"I can see nothing amusing in the situation, West."

"I suppose not," said Roger, dryly. "Hadn't you better start searching? You'll want to begin on us, but that doesn't include my wife." He grew more aloof and Abbott obviously felt on dangerous ground, for he said stiffly: "If it is necessary to search Mrs. West – and I hope it will not be – I hardly need tell you the proper measures will be taken. Will you be good enough to call in Martin and the others?"

"Others?" ejaculated Roger.

"There are two detective-officers with him," Abbott said.

Roger nodded curtly, went to the front door and called the sergeant and his men, then returned to the front room. One of the men waited in the lounge. He was an old officer whom West looked at in bewilderment, for his presence brought the truth home to him more forcibly. It was a severe jolt to think that a man who called him 'sir' and took his instructions should now be watching to make sure that he destroyed no evidence and was not able to leave the room.

Had he cared to make a fuss, he could have insisted on more formality; there was no point in doing so, however, for it would serve only to increase Abbott's suspicions. It was evident that the Superintendent seriously believed the allegations to be true, but even more disturbing was the fact that Abbott had the approval – in fact, the instructions – of the Assistant Commissioner.

Mark began to protest when Abbott left the room, but grew tongue-tied. Janet sat rigidly in an easy chair and looked out into the murky evening. The small clock on the mantelpiece showed that it had turned half past four – but Roger had forgotten *Arsenic and Old Lace*. He heard the heavy movements of the men upstairs and thought how often he had been on exactly the same quest.

He had searched with a thoroughness which had brought the tension of the people waiting in another part of the house to breaking point. He had worked with a grim determination to find some evidence of complicity in crime and to break his victim's resistance. After the search, provided it proved successful, were the arrest, the charge, the magistrate's court, the gradual collection and piecing together of evidence, the final day of the trial, often absurdly short in view of the weary preparations which had preceded it. The jury, the judge, the sentence – and prison.

Only vaguely did he think of Mark's peculiar behaviour and Janet's warning glance. He could not really grasp what was happening. Abbott, instead of being the Apostle of Gloom, became the Apostle of Doom, because – the Superintendent would not have come here, and Chatworth would not have signed the warrant, had they not been reasonably certain that they would find evidence that he had accepted bribes.

He lit a cigarette and stared at Janet. Her lips curved in a faint smile but she was as much on edge as he. Mark seemed the calmest of them all. There was irony in the fact that the day had begun so well, the delight of getting home early, the preparations for the theatre, and now—this.

The men were still moving about upstairs and time was flying – it was a quarter past five. Every minute worsened the suspense.

Janet turned restlessly towards the window.

"How much longer will they be?"

"Not long," Roger said.

Mark broke in, smiling reassuringly.

"After all, no news is good news, if they'd found the alleged evidence they would have come down shouting huzzahs by now." His good spirits were irritating, yet it was rare that he got on Roger's nerves. There was a reason

for his confidence, some secret he had confided to Janet but which Roger could not guess – except vaguely, and then only by drawing a conclusion that he wanted to dismiss as absurd.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs.

The three of them turned towards the door and only the plainclothes man seemed indifferent. All of the search party appeared to be coming and Roger, feeling a curious mixture of relief and tension, stared at the door handle. Someone spoke in a muffled voice but the handle did not turn. The front door opened and footsteps scraped on the narrow gravel path.

Roger muttered a sharp imprecation, stepped towards the door and opened it. Abbott was standing at the foot of the stairs and he regarded Roger without expression.

"Well?" snapped Roger.

"I want you to believe that I'm really sorry about this," Abbott said. His lips moved automatically and he looked incapable of feeling. He glanced towards the open door, and Roger, following his gaze, saw a woman approaching with Sergeant Martin. He recognised the newcomer as a tall, round-faced, jovial policewoman, one of the few female detectives at the Yard. Her purpose was only too apparent. He turned back to Abbott and spoke in a low-pitched, angry voice.

"I won't forget this afternoon's work, Abbott."

"I'm sorry," Abbott repeated monotonously. "Will you explain to your wife?"

Roger said: "Yes," sharply, and turned on his heel. He caught Janet's eye as he returned to the room; she gave him the impression that she had heard Abbott's remarks and was half-prepared for what was coming.

"They want to search you," Roger said. "They've a woman outside, so they're not breaking any regulations." His voice was harsh with repressed anger, for this was the final insult, the crowning indignity. He really felt like going on the rampage, only restraining himself because he knew that it would make matters worse.

The woman officer stood on the threshold, smiling as if it were the best joke in the world – she was the only member of the police who seemed unaffected by the situation. Roger stared when she winked at him before going upstairs with Janet to the main bedroom. Abbott entered the lounge and stared at Roger.

"All right," Roger said, "get on with it," and allowed himself to be searched, standing rigid, neither helping nor impeding Tiny Martin, whose every movement seemed to be reluctant. The contents of his pockets were set out in neat array on a corner of the tea-table, next to the muffins which were now cold and unappetising, with congealed margarine smeared on them. The fire had nearly gone out and Mark, suddenly waking out of a reverie, began to stoke it, putting on a few knobs of coal and two logs and then blowing gently with the bellows.

Tiny Martin finished and Roger looked at Abbott. "Well, are you satisfied?" he demanded. The fire was blazing and warming his back – he

had not realised, before, how cold he felt.

"There's nothing here," Abbott said, and then took some brown paper and oddments of string from his pocket. "What was in this, West?"

Roger stared. "I don't know."

"It is addressed to you and it's registered," Abbott said. "What was in it?"

Roger stretched out a hand and took the paper. It was familiar but nothing clicked in his mind at first. It was of good quality, with a typewritten address on a plain label. The postmark was blurred but, after some seconds of close scrutiny, he saw that it was franked December, although he could not distinguish the date. His face cleared and he handed it back, knowing both what had been in it when it had reached him and why Abbott had found it upstairs.

"It contained a Christmas present from my father," he said, "two first editions of Scott."

"Christmas!" Abbott was stung to the ejaculation.

"It was tucked away in my drawer for some months," continued Roger, warming to the task, "but I took it out to-day and wrapped a birthday present for my wife in it. So it has quite pleasant associations, hasn't it? I carried it all the way from here to the Yard, it was folded up in my raincoat pocket when you saw me this morning and when I went to Estelle's in Oxford Street and bought a set of lingerie. Ladies' underwear," he added with a savage note in his voice, "if that isn't too indelicate a subject for you."

"Now, West—" began Abbott.

"'Now West' be damned!" snapped Roger. "This is an outrageous visit and I'll have your scalp for it before I've finished. I may be a policeman, but I have some rights in law."

Mark began to whistle a dirge. Roger swung round on him angrily.

"Is that necessary? The piano's still there."

"Naughty, naughty!" exclaimed Mark. "I was only trying to while away the time. Ah! Sounds of progress." Footsteps, this time of the women, sounded on the stairs. Janet was first and she was hurrying. The door burst open and she entered, her eyes excited.

"Nothing on my person!" she declared, "but did she make a job of it! Well, Mr. Abbott, perhaps you're satisfied now that my husband is *not* a renegade policeman?" She stared at the paper and snapped: "What are you doing with that?"

"He thinks the filthy lucre was wrapped up in it," said Roger, more calmly, "and I've been giving him the history of it. Darling, next time I bring you a present you ought to put the wrapper in the salvage basket, or it will be used as evidence against me." He thrust his hands deep in his pockets and, now that the search was over – except for this room – he felt much better. He insisted on staying while the room was searched methodically. Nothing was left out of place, perhaps because the job was done under Abbott's cold eyes. When the men had finished, Roger eyed Abbott steadily and, after a prolonged silence, asked: "Well, what's the next shot in your

locker?”

For the first time he wondered whether they would take him away.

Chapter 3

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF PEP MORGAN

Had the police made any discovery there would have been a formal charge; now, the worst they could do was to ask him to go with them for questioning. Abbott seemed not to hear Roger's question but turned and motioned to Tiny Martin and the policemen – the woman detective had already gone, her prompt disappearance a sufficient testimony to the lack of results. The lesser policemen went out and Martin closed the door.

Abbott looked even more discomforted.

"I don't propose to do anything else now, West, but—"

"Now wait a minute!" said Roger, quickly, "it isn't quite as easy as this. Either you give me a clear bill or I call for legal aid – and I hope you realise, Abbott, that I can create the mother and father of a row over this."

"You would be ill-advised—" Abbott began, only to be cut short again.

"What you seem to have forgotten is that I'm a policeman too," said Roger, and as he thought more of the way in which this had been managed he found his temper rising. "If there were any suspicions of a man at the Yard and I had charge of the case, I'd have the decency to tell him what allegations had been made, and ask him for an explanation. I would *not* burst into his house, risk upsetting his wife, accuse him—"

"I accused you of nothing," interrupted Abbott.

"You charged me with nothing but you've accused me with plenty," Roger said, warmly. "Think back to our conversation in the dining-room – was that a friendly chat? I've taken just as much as I'm prepared to, Abbott, and now I want a full explanation and an apology."

Abbott rubbed his chin, slowly.

"I think you had better come with me," he said,

"Not I," retorted Roger, making a stand. "If you want me, get a warrant."

"Do I understand that you refuse to come with me?" Abbott demanded.

Roger said: "You understand that I refuse to come to the Yard for questioning until I have had a fuller explanation of the reason for this outrage and until I have had an opportunity for getting legal assistance. That's the least you would do if I were an ordinary civilian."

Abbott's mouth closed like a trap.

He turned and, without nodding to Janet or Mark, went out of the room. He did not open the door wide but sidled through and then closed it silently. There were muffled footsteps in the hall before the front door closed. Footsteps followed on the gravel path. Roger stepped to the window and saw the little party disappearing towards King's Road, shadowy figures in the evening gloom. The sound of their footsteps grew fainter, the street and the house were silent when the last dull thud had died.

Roger turned slowly to face the room, his lips curved in a smile which

held no amusement.

"We will now see what Walt Disney has to say," he said with forced lightness. "Abbott's one master of fantasy, Disney's another, so the law of copyright might be involved." He stopped smiling as he looked at Janet. "Sweet, I'm terribly sorry!"

"Don't be an ass," said Janet, quietly, "if it had to happen I'm glad it was here."

"Are you?" demanded Roger. "I'm not and before I'm through I'll let Chatworth know what I think of his stinking methods. I might have expected it of Abbott, but not of Chatworth." He lit a cigarette and stared at the teapot. "Am I thirsty!" he exclaimed, and flung himself into a chair. "If I could only see the slightest gleam of light it wouldn't be so bad, but I'd no idea, I didn't dream—"

"I'll make some tea," Mark volunteered.

He took up the tea tray and went out, nearly dropping the tray as he opened the door. He had lived at the Bell Street house for some months and was familiar with every room, and as he often said, he liked to amuse himself in the kitchen.

Janet came over and sat on the arm of Roger's chair.

"Feeling pretty grim, darling?"

Roger said: "Quite damnable! I—but Jan, what's Mark been up to?" He sat back and gripped Janet's arm tightly. "I'm so woolly-headed I forgot all about that rumpus, and he sent you a tea-set as a present, didn't he? I'm not dreaming, you did have the parcel from him this morning?"

"Ye-es," admitted Janet, "I was afraid you were going to say something about that before." She stood up, stepped to the mantelpiece and took down a small cup and saucer, a fragile, beautiful thing. Idly, she flicked it with her finger; the china rang sweet and clear. "This was just to hoodwink Abbott."

Roger said, in incredulous tones: "Did he know that Abbott would be here?"

"Yes."

"And that din—" Roger jumped to his feet and stared at her, his eyes blazing. "There *was* someone upstairs, I thought I heard a bump when he was playing the fool on the piano! Jan, put me out of my misery, what has Mark been up to?"

"He—" began Janet, and then stopped helplessly. "Oh, we'll have to leave it to him, I don't know any more about it than you do, except that he told me he was going to make the very devil of a row, and the more noise I would make the better it would be. Abbott did scare me and – well, I joined in. Did you see me look at you?"

"I did," said Roger, "and I'm—"

"Except for Mark the only light relief was when that woman took me upstairs," Janet said. "She was a pet, Roger! She told me that she didn't know what Abbott was up to and if he thought you were involved in any shady work he must be off his head – she was the most refreshing creature I've met for a long time. You know her, of course?"

Roger nodded. “Yes, Winnie Marchant – a good old stick.” The loyalty of the policewoman cheered him up but he did not wait for Mark to bring in the tea. “Come on,” he said, “I’m going to wring the truth out of Mark.”

Mark was leaning against the gas-stove, whistling gently, imitating the noise of the kettle, which was singing. He had washed out the teapot and held that in one hand, a cigarette in the other. He had brushed his hair and straightened his tie and he looked more like his usual immaculate self – even to the faint smile on his rather ascetic face. His eyes quizzed Roger.

“Here it comes!” he said, in mock dismay.

“Never mind making tea,” Roger said. “Janet will do that. What brought you here?”

“Oh, my natural prescience,” said Mark, airily. “I heard a little bird tell a story about Abbott and Handsome West and Tiny Martin being on Handsome’s heels and I thought I would come and introduce a little light relief. Was I good?” He seemed naively anxious. “If there’s any damage to that A string, I’ll have it put right at my expense.”

Janet took the teapot from him and Roger said: “Talk, Mark.”

“How crude!” said Mark, and affected to shudder.

“This is no time for playing the fool!” snapped Roger.

“Er—no, I suppose not,” said Mark, sobering up yet still smiling. “I can’t tell you any more, Roger, it’s just as I’ve already said, except that the little bird was Pep Morgan.”

“Pep!” exclaimed Janet, swinging on her heels.

“Morgan?” asked Roger, dazedly. “Where does he come in?”

“The senior partner of Morgan and Morgan, Private Inquiry Agents,” said Mark, expansively, “telephoned me about half an hour before I arrived here and told me to hurry over here and to kick up the very dickens of a shindy if I found Abbott on the premises. Had it been anyone else but Pep I would have told him to take his practical jokes elsewhere, but Pep – he wouldn’t play the fool,” added Mark, more soberly. “His voice was what one hears described as ‘laden with emotion’ – as a matter of fact, when I asked him a question he jumped at me and told me to listen carefully if I wanted”—he paused, put his head on one side and then delivered himself of the final blow gently—”to save Handsome from Dartmoor. What else could I do but obey, Roger? Pep said Dartmoor, and that’s what he meant.”

Roger said slowly: “He must have had an idea of what Abbott was coming for and knew that if anything were found it would mean a long stretch.” He smoothed the back of his head and watched the steam hissing from the kettle, while Janet stood unheeding. Only when the lid began to jump about did she look away from Roger and pour the water into the teapot.

“Now that we can have the cup that cheers, let’s go into the lounge,” suggested Mark.

They acted on the suggestion, Roger looking very thoughtful. When they were sitting about the table he spoke quietly.

“Pep was upstairs, of course?”

“It seems likely,” admitted Mark.

“Likely?” asked Roger, and then with a sharp exclamation: “My sainted aunt, I can’t think of anything more crazy! Pep phoned you and warned you that there was trouble ahead for me.

“He wanted you to create a din while he got in upstairs and he—” he paused, boggling at the actual words.

“Took something away!” exploded Janet.

Roger gulped. “What else could it mean?”

“Nothing,” said Mark promptly, “and you’ve got to swallow your impatience and wait until after black-out, when Pep’s coming to tell you all about it. He says he won’t chance it earlier because the house will probably be watched. Sweetheart,” he added lightly, to Janet, “is that tea brewed yet? I mean—”

“Oh, yes,” said Janet quickly. She poured milk into the cups, picked up the teapot – and stared at the plain water coming out. Mark gaped. Roger asked irritably what had happened.

“I forgot to put the tea in,” Janet said, jumping up hastily. “I won’t be a moment!”

The little incident eased the prevailing tension, because, Roger said, it showed how completely they had gone to pieces; the situation demanded careful thought. Mark insisted that he knew no more than Pep Morgan’s cryptic telephone call and none of them doubted that Morgan had visited the house – either in person or by proxy – and taken ‘something’ away. None of them wanted to admit it but in their hearts they acknowledged that the ‘something’ could only be the ‘sum of money’ for which Abbott had come.

As they drank hot tea and ate cold, doughy muffins, Janet said: “It won’t be dark for two hours, we can’t wait and do nothing all that time.”

“Patience is a virtue,” declared Mark, brightly.

“Ass!” said Janet. “Roger, what are you going to do?”

Mark beamed. “The brilliant young idol of the Yard has offended his Superintendent, has behaved in a way wholly reprehensible and has therefore made it impossible for him to act. Had he reasoned with Abbott he might have got something; as it is—” he shrugged. “Not that I don’t sympathise,” he added.

“Abbott makes shivers run up and down my spine, too; he’s the coldest individual I’ve ever met.”

“Ought you to have raged at him?” Janet asked.

Roger laughed shortly. “Oh, no! I ought to have patted his back and told him it was very nice of him to have come himself instead of leaving the dirty work to Martin. Confound the fellow! He knew what was coming this morning, but he didn’t have the decency to warn me that I was under suspicion. He *did* ask me whether I would be at home – I suppose he thought I would see what he was driving at and would try to get the stuff away. That’s why Martin shadowed me. Of all the—”

“Be reasonable,” Mark said, judicial. “He wanted you to be caught red-handed. Handsome West here, piles of dirty dough there, case all cut and dried, snap go the darbies!”

"Your turn of wit is execrable," Roger said, pointedly.

"My common sense is remarkable," Mark retorted. "You wouldn't seriously expect him to warn you, would you?"

Roger said: "This kind of thing has happened before. It's usual for a Superintendent or the Assistant Commissioner to call the suspect in and tell him bluntly what is alleged against him. He's asked whether he has anything to say and, if necessary, is detained until a search has been made and inquiries are completed." Frowning, he conceded: "There's just one thing – they might have believed that the money would be brought here sometime to-day – that if they acted too soon they would give me a chance to get it somewhere else. Hence the dog-watch."

"Ah, light dawns on the troubled mind," said Mark. "You were out for lunch, weren't you? During lunch the lucre was doubtless planted. Pep heard about it and—"

"I can't believe it!" snapped Roger.

"You can and you do," Mark told him quietly, "but the crisis is past, you weren't caught with the stuff, so you've a chance of proving that you're really a detective." There was a note of raillery in his voice. "We're talking on supposition, but if Pep learned that goods were to be planted on you, obviously someone was to do it. There's your problem – who, and why?"

"Ye-es," admitted Roger, slowly. He finished his tea in silence, then leaned back and studied the ceiling. The others did not interrupt his train of thought but Mark pretended to find some interest in a magazine. Suddenly Roger jumped to his feet, abruptly enough to startle them, and stepped to the telephone in the corner of the room.

It was nearly seven o'clock. Although black-out was not due until after half past eight, it was so dark that Janet went to the door and switched on the light. Roger dialled a number and, after receiving an answer, asked: "Is Sir Guy Chatworth in, please?"

Janet stayed by the door, eyeing him tensely. He was asked his name and then to hold on; he waited for a long time before

Chatworth's servant – he had called the A.C. at his private flat, in Victoria – said that he was sorry but Sir Guy was not in and would not be in all the evening. Before Roger could say anything more, the servant rang off.

Mark shook his head sadly, still the buffoon.

"So he won't talk to his favourite officer?"

"It's fantastic!" cried Janet. "I thought Chatworth was a friend. Roger, they *can't* believe that you've done anything to deserve this, I mean – well, if they do they're not worth a tinker's curse!"

"Indignant female expresses herself forcefully," murmured Mark. "This is a conspiracy of silence. They wouldn't have acted this way and certainly wouldn't have put Abbott on the job if they hadn't meant to make it as hot as they could, so they must have a reason. They may not be sentimental but they're not fools. So the reason's a good one." He grew sober. "It's no use blinking at facts, is it?"

"No-o," conceded Roger, glumly.

“I suppose I should start getting supper,” said Janet, opening the door. “I won’t be long.”

Neither of the men commented on the fact that she obviously wanted to commune with herself while preparing the meal. They sat in silence most of the time, both admitting that there was no point in talking for the sake of it. No one telephoned.

At a quarter past eight Janet brought in a savoury cheese dish on a trolley and they had supper sitting round the fire; conversation was at a minimum. With every minute that passed the seriousness of the position weighed more heavily on Roger and, after he had drawn the black-out, he waited on tenterhooks for the arrival of Pep Morgan.

That amiable little private detective arrived just after nine-fifteen.

They heard him open the gate and Roger reached the front door before he knocked. As soon as the door was closed again Roger switched on the light and looked at the smiling, rosy face of Morgan. A shiny man from his thin grey hair to his polished shoes – bright enough to see his face in, Morgan boasted proudly. In a good light, he scintillated. His cheeks shone like a new apple, his bright eyes gleamed, his astonishingly white teeth behind a full mouth seemed to sparkle. He was a chunky man, well- dressed but running to fat about the waist.

“Hallo, Handsome,” he greeted and patted Roger’s elbow. “This is a game, isn’t it?”

“Come in, Pep,” said Roger and let the little man into the lounge, where he shook hands ceremoniously with Janet and smiled brightly at Mark.

“So you did your stuff, Mr. Lessing! I was upstairs, and believe me I thought you would have the police on you for disturbing the peace – marvellous, it was, marvellous!” He looked back at Roger and his smile grew strained. “Handsome, you won’t take me wrong, I know, but I’m staking my reputation on you.”

Janet and Mark faded into the background. Roger smiled, faintly, and asked: “How’s that, Pep?”

“It’s a remarkable business, it really is,” said Morgan, suddenly grinning too widely. “You’ve guessed I came here when Abbott was on the spot, and removed a little trifle from upstairs?”

“Yes,” said Roger.

“One thousand pounds,” said Morgan, softly. “One thousand and of the very best in five-pound notes, that’s what I found upstairs, underneath your wardrobe, Handsome. Facts are facts, aren’t they?” he added earnestly. “Look!” He took out his wallet and extracted two crisp, clean five-pound Bank of England notes. “I’ve brought two of them. I thought I’d better not bring them all in case Martin saw me come in and wanted to know what I was doing – he *might* have insisted on searching me. That wouldn’t have done, would it?” Morgan was nervous but perky with it. “I don’t know who’s got their knife into you, Handsome, but someone wants to put you on the spot.”

Roger said nothing, he just stared at him.

"You must feel pretty bad about it," said Morgan, "and so do I, Handsome, believe me, so do I. When I heard what was coming to you I did some pretty hard thinking, and I came to the conclusion that it was a racket and I couldn't let you down. Lucky thing you've got some friends at the Yard, Handsome."

Roger said slowly: "What do you mean?"

"Well, it was like this," said Morgan, moving to the table and sitting on the corner. He swung his legs and the electric light glinted on the polished caps of his shoes. "I was tipped off, you know what I mean. No names no pack-drill, but I was chatting with one of the women at the Yard and she started to talk about you. Some of the ladies get a proper crush on him, Mrs. West!" Morgan shot a quick glance at Janet but did not pause. "She didn't exactly *tell* me, in so many words, but she did say she'd got a nasty job on this afternoon, and she rambled on a bit – talked about having been told there would be some dough in the bedroom of a Yard man some time after lunch and it would be curtains for him if it was found – she didn't say *you* were the man concerned, Handsome, but she'd been talking about you and when she went she gave me a wink – kind of telling me that if I couldn't put two and two together she would be disappointed in me. So I did some high-powered thinking and then decided I'd better act. I rang up Mr. Lessing and then came along here and did my stuff upstairs."

After a long pause, Roger said: "And you found a thousand pounds in notes?"

"Two hundred five-pound notes as sure as my name is Pep Morgan," declared Morgan, soberly, "and I don't mind admitting I was pretty scared; if they'd found that dough on me they might have asked a lot of awkward questions. So what I did was to tie it up and register it and send it to *Post Restante,* Lower Strand, addressed to a Mr. North. I thought that sounded better than 'Smith'," added Morgan anxiously, "but it's a bit close to West, perhaps. I hope I didn't slip up there."

"No-o, you didn't slip up," said Roger, smiling into the little man's eyes. "Pep, I don't know how to say thanks."

"Oh, forget about it," said Morgan awkwardly. "After all, you've done me many a good turn, and I know if they found that dough here you would have a taste of what you dish out to others, but I don't believe you would take bribes, Handsome." He took out his cigarette-case but Janet stepped forward with a box. "Oh, ta," he said, beaming upon her, "bit of a shock for you, Mrs. West, I expect."

"It wasn't a pleasure," Janet admitted.

"I'll say it wasn't!" exclaimed Morgan. "Well, I've told you all I know, Handsome. I don't mind admitting that when I think of my being upstairs when Abbott was down here I go all over goose-flesh! I needn't say that you won't let me down – 'course not!" He laughed and then drew on his cigarette. "What a business it is, isn't it?"

"Did Winnie Marchant tip you off?"

Morgan wrinkled his forehead and repeated: "No names, no pack-drill –

was she here?"

In spite of himself, Roger smiled.

"Yes, and told Janet what she thinks!"

"Well, I'm not the only one you have to thank," Morgan said. He slid from the table and stood up, frowning, barely reaching Roger's chin. "Handsome, what's it about? Who'd do the dirty on you like this?"

"I don't know," said Roger, slowly.

"You must have some idea," protested Morgan.

"I haven't," Roger insisted, "but one day I will have." He spoke much more lightly. "I hope it won't be too long. What are you going to do now, Pep?"

"I'm not going to do anything!" Morgan declared hastily.

"Are you busy?"

"Oh, I've got enough to do—"

"Will you take a commission from me?" asked Roger.

Morgan stared at him, little eyes glistening.

"I never thought I'd come to the day when a Chief Inspector had to ask me that, Handsome! We-ell – it's all in the way of business. I suppose there's no need for anyone to know how I came into it. You might have sent for me, for all they know. That's a good idea," Morgan went on hastily; "you could have phoned me and asked me to try to find out whether anyone's trying to put you on the spot. It would be a natural thing to do, seeing that you can't do much yourself, wouldn't it? What's happened? Suspended?"

"Not yet," said Roger, "but probably I will be."

"Nothing to prevent you from looking round yourself, is there?" asked Morgan, "and Mr. Lessing would lend a hand, too – as well as me. These fivers might help. Inspector West works from home, so to speak!" He laughed, quite gaily. "What do you want me to do?"

"Just make general inquiries," Roger said, "and try"—he paused and looked uncertainly about him—"try to find whether anyone has a grudge against me. I suppose someone who's just come out of stir might be getting his revenge—"

"I thought of that," said Morgan "but it would have to be a big shot – I mean, a thousand pounds isn't small money, is it? I've been thinking about those who've come out in the last month, and I don't know of anyone who could lay his hands on a thousand quid. If it had been fifty—still, I don't mind trying, Handsome. There won't be any secret about it, will there?"

"None at all," said Roger.

"Okay, then, I'm hired!" Morgan smiled about him and looked embarrassed when Janet came forward and shook hands and added her thanks. "He'd do the same for me," he mumbled and hurried to the door. Roger watched him disappear into the gloom.

Then, frowning, he stepped along the path. Janet and Mark were in the hall but he did not speak to them, just hurried in Morgan's wake. It was not quite dark and he could see Morgan's shadowy figure – and suddenly he saw two others converge on the private detective and heard a voice which he

knew was Martin's, saying: "I want a word with you, Morgan."

Morgan protested in a high-pitched squeak and Roger drew nearer.

Chapter 4

INFORMATION FROM EDDIE

Perhaps because he thought that Roger would be following, Morgan held his ground and argued, loud-voiced, at being sprung upon out of the gloom. He talked to Tiny Martin and the other policeman luridly enough to cheer Roger up as he drew nearer, keeping against the hedges of the small gardens of Bell Street so that he would not be noticed if Martin looked round. Ten feet away, he stood still.

"There's no need for you to behave like that," growled Martin, forsaking his usual imitation of Abbott's voice, "you've co-operated with us before, haven't you?"

"I haven't had anyone run out at me and make me jump out o' my skin!" snapped Morgan, "and I won't stand for it, don't make any mistake about that. Now you've done it, what do you want?"

"Superintendent Abbott would like a word with you," said Martin, climbing down reluctantly.

"Well, he knows where I live, don't he?" demanded Morgan truculently. "He seems to have gone off his rocker *and* so do you, Tiny." Although still aggrieved he sounded mollified – a wise reaction to 'Superintendent Abbott would *like* a word with you.'

"I've just been along to see Handsome West – you must be daft if you think he's crooked."

"Never mind that," said Martin; "if you're wise, Morgan, you'll come along to the Yard and see the Superintendent."

"Who does he think he is?" demanded Morgan. "If he wants me, why doesn't he ring me or send to my home – a man can't walk about the street in peace." But he made no further protest and went with Martin to King's Road. Roger stayed on the other side until a bus lumbered out of the gloom, stopped for the two men and then went lurching onwards. Roger hesitated and then turned back to Bell Street. The other Yard man was still near the house and Roger caught a glimpse of him on the other side of the road. Resisting the temptation to call out, Roger went back into the house but did not return to the lounge.

"What are you doing?" Janet asked. It was an indication of her frame of mind, for he was putting on his raincoat.

Roger smiled, thinly.

"I'm going to the Yard," he said.

"Do you think—" began Janet, but broke off.

"Is it wise?" asked Mark, outlined against the light of the lounge, looking gaunt, spare and thoughtful.

"I'm not suspended yet," said Roger, "and I might pick up a hint from someone – if Winnie Marchant was prepared to let Pep know, one of the

others might give me a hint of what it's all about." He hesitated and put his hands on Janet's shoulders and kissed her lightly. "I don't expect I'll be late," he said. "Make Mark play backgammon with you. If I'm going to be delayed I'll ring you." He stood back and added more lightly: "It'll be interesting if only because we can see what it's like on the other side of the fence!" He lit a cigarette, looked at Mark with an unspoken 'keep her cheerful' and then went out, closing the door firmly behind him.

The plain-clothes man was near the gate.

Roger drew on his cigarette so that his features were illuminated, then shone his torch into the other's face, taking the fellow by surprise and making him back away in confusion.

"Good evening," said Roger, coldly, and he was glad that it was raining and cold enough to make the man's vigil an ordeal. He walked briskly once he had grown accustomed to the gloom, but did not wait for a bus, thinking that the last one had probably gone. He kept his eyes open for a taxi but had reached Sloane Square, after a little under half an hour, before he saw one. He was not sure that the Yard man had kept up with him, but thought it likely.

As he waited on the kerb while the taxi turned in the road, footsteps, soft and stealthy, drew near him. He took it for granted that it was the plain-clothes man and ignored the approach. The taxi pulled up and the driver expressed himself tersely on the weather, before demanding: "You aren't going far, are you?"

"Scotland Yard," said Roger. The shadowy figure behind him had loomed nearer and he wondered what the man was thinking. As he was climbing into the cab, the figure moved forward and a soft voice, certainly not belonging to the detective, broke the stillness.

"Excuse me, sir."

Roger turned his head, when half-in and half-out of the cab.

"Yes?" He was in no mood for casual encounters.

"I hope you won't think this an impertinence," said the stranger, nervously, "but I am most anxious to get to Piccadilly and the buses seem to have stopped running. I wonder if you would mind if I shared your cab?"

"What erbaht askin' *me?"* demanded the driver, sourly.

"Oh, yes, of course – if your fare wouldn't mind—" The man looked towards the cabby. Roger noticed that he wore a trilby hat pulled low over his forehead and his coat collar was turned up. As he saw the pale blur of his face he thought, impatiently, that it could not have happened at a less favourable moment. Yet in these days of taxi famine it was usual enough. He said: "Of course," and hoped that he sounded cordial.

There was no sign of anyone else nearby.

"Thank you so much," said the stranger, eagerly. "Cabby, I will make it worth your while—"

"Go orn, 'op in," said the driver.

Roger moved to the far corner and the newcomer sat back with a sigh of relief. After a pause, he murmured that taxi-drivers were getting far too

independent, it was most embarrassing to ask favours of them; it was very good indeed of Roger to allow him to share the taxi – and he had overheard him say that he was going to Scotland Yard.

That was an invitation to talk, but Roger made an evasive remark and sat back. Not affronted, the other continued to talk of the weather, the war situation, the possibility of rationing lasting for a year or more after the armistice, the price of furniture and income-tax. Roger heard only a little of it but wished the man would stop talking.

At last the cab drew up outside the gates of Scotland Yard and the cabby opened the glass partition and said: "Needn't take yer right in, need I?"

"No, this will do," said Roger.

He squeezed out, stumbling over the other man's outstretched legs and hearing garrulous apologies. In a rising temper he paid off the driver and watched the rear light fading into the murk of the night. He heard the footsteps of the policeman on duty and, a moment later, a bull's eye lantern was switched on, making him blink.

"Is that necessary?" he snapped.

"Oh – sorry, sir," said the policeman, putting the light out hastily. "Nasty night, sir, isn't it?"

"Yes," growled Roger and strode towards the steps. It was some consolation to know that rumour had not yet reached the police on the gates and that the man had no instructions to stop him. He went up the steps and into the hall, where a sergeant on duty saluted. He was an oldish fellow with a wisp of yellow hair and very thin features. It might have been the light and shades of the hall, but to Roger he seemed surprised as he said "Good evening."

"'Evening, Bates," grunted Roger.

He passed no one downstairs nor on the stairs, but the walls themselves seemed cold and hostile. He had never been in the Yard before except when he had felt the friendliness of its warm atmosphere. He began to realise how much the place meant to him. The dimly lighted passages, shadowy now, seemed to hold a menace which was no less disturbing because its cause was unwarranted. He even hesitated before turning the handle of his own room. He saw the light at the bottom of the door and at the sides and knew that one of the other three C.I.s with whom he shared the office was in.

He opened the door quickly and stepped through.

Eddie Day was sitting at his desk with a watchmaker's glass screwed to one of his prominent eyes. He looked up – and the glass dropped out, bounced from his desk and rolled along the floor. He gaped, his prominent teeth parted.

Roger repressed a sour comment, loosened his coat and approached Day, looking down at the startled man.

"So you've heard, have you?" he said.

"H-h-heard w-w-what?" stammered Eddie.

Roger shrugged. "Why pretend that you haven't, Eddie? Is it all round the Yard?"

Eddie closed his mouth, then bent down to retrieve the glass. His face was red when he straightened up and looked into Roger's narrowed eyes. Then, abruptly: "Handsome, what the heck have you been up to?"

"It has spread, then?" Roger insisted.

"I've heard a rumour"—Eddie said and to his credit he stopped pretending and did not try to make light of it. "You could have knocked me down, you could, with a feather, Handsome. I don't know what to make of it, I really don't. You're the *last* one I would have thought—" he broke off and shrugged. "What are you doing here, you've been suspended from duty, haven't you?"

"I haven't been told so," said Roger.

"Oh! Oh, well, perhaps that's a rumour," Eddie said, a shade more brightly. "I hope it is, Handsome. I can't believe—" he paused and then went on: "Did Abbott have a search-warrant?"

"He did, and he used it."

"Crikey!" exclaimed Eddie, pushing his lips forward and eyeing Roger wide-eyed. "I just couldn't believe it when I heard – Solly Bennett told me, I thought he was joking, but he said he'd seen the warrant. What's the Old Man got to say?"

Roger said: "The Assistant Commissioner hasn't thought it worth discussing with me."

"Strewth!" exclaimed Eddie. "The old—"

Roger interrupted, sitting on the corner of the desk, unconsciously letting water soak from his mackintosh on to some blotting-paper. Red and green ink on the paper grew blurred and indistinct.

"Eddie, give me a break," he said, speaking softly. "If you know what they think I've been doing, if you've any idea from where they got the tip, tell me. I was bowled right over and I was pretty sharp with Abbott. I know nothing about it, of course. What do you know?"

"We-ell," began Eddie, uncomfortably, and then he leaned forward and whispered: "Handsome, I'm with you. I think it's all a lot of nonsense. I can't understand the Old Man thinking you'd do such a thing. All I know is that you're supposed to have accepted bribes over the last three months."

"From whom?" Roger demanded.

"The squeak came from Joe Leech."

"Oh," said Roger, standing up and stepping restlessly to the fireplace, where the fire, burning low, glowed red. He knew Joe Leech, a bookmaker in the East End who kept within the law and was – in his own opinion – allowed to go to the extreme limits because he was a regular purveyor of information to the police. His information was usually reliable and the police were often obliged to act on it. Few at the Yard had any regard for Leech, whose bad reputation in the East End was well known. Two or three times a year he had to be given police protection after he had squealed and when relatives and friends of his victims had threatened violence. Roger had a better understanding of the reason for Abbott taking action. Leech would not have squealed, knowing that there was no truth in the allegation, unless

he had been heavily bribed.

"Don't say I told you," pleaded Eddie. "I shouldn't really, Handsome, but I don't believe—"

He heard someone approaching and put his glass hastily to his eye. The footsteps passed. Eddie stared at Roger with his glass at his eye and his forehead and nose wrinkled.

"It's a bad do, Handsome, that's what I say, but—"

He broke off when the telephone on his desk rang. He answered it and Roger judged, from his manner, that it was Chatworth. Eddie was more impressed – even awed – by the Assistant Commissioner than most of the others, although Chatworth had a reputation for being a martinet. Bitterly, Roger reflected that he had always thought the A.C. well-disposed towards him. For the first time a vague suspicion crossed his mind that this was all being done deliberately, to make it appear that he was in bad odour with the Yard and so that he could work more freely outside it. His heart leapt, but on reflection the idea was patiently absurd.

Eddie replaced the receiver and stood up, gathering some papers from his untidy desk.

"Got to go and see the Old Man," he said, in a confidential undertone; "he wants my report on those dud notes – you know the ones I mean."

"Yes," said Roger, with a flicker of interest. "Are they slush?" He thought of the £1,000 now at the Strand P.O. waiting for 'Mr. North' but it was too early to ask Eddie's opinion of the two specimens; Eddie was not a man to be trusted in these circumstances. There were two Yard men who might take the risk of helping him, and one, Sloan, was on holiday.

"Stake my reputation on it," said Eddie, half-way to the door, "but they're good – no one else at the Yard would have told them from the real thing. Er —good luck, Handsome, if I can do anything let me know." He went out, perspiring partly because of his coming interview but partly because he felt that the situation was beyond him.

Alone in the office, Roger looked about him, putting his hands in his raincoat pockets. He felt an envelope in there but thought nothing of it. The green-distempered walls with a few photographs, including one, old and faded, of a Suffragette procession down Whitehall in 1913, two cricket XIs, one of them including himself, two or three maps of London districts and several calendars. On one of the desks was a small vase of fading daffodils. The fireplace was littered with cigarette ends and the carpet, with several threadbare patches, had a few trodden into it. The desks were bright yellow but, in places, the polish had worn off and the bare wood showed. There were little partitions for different papers – *'For Attention'* – *'For Review'* – *'Mail In.'* Suddenly he stopped reading the black stencilled letters, for his own desk was absolutely empty; everything had been removed since he had been there that morning.

He turned abruptly, taking his hand out of his pocket and drawing the envelope with it. He looked down at the crumpled paper, and frowned. It was stout and newish-looking; had it been in his pocket for some time it

would have looked grubby. He remembered thinking that morning that it was a fortnight since he had last worn his raincoat. He had not noticed the envelope then.

It was sealed and there was no writing on it.

He inserted a finger at one end and ripped it open. Inside was a single slip of paper on which were two or three lines of block letter writing, upside down. He turned it swiftly and read:

> *Dear West.*
> *I've another proposition I think will interest you – it will pay even better than the last. Meet me at the usual place, to-morrow, Wednesday, at 7.30, will you?*
>
> *K.*

Tight-lipped, Roger re-read it. All that it meant and all it might have led to passed through his mind, together, with a fact which he had to face and which almost stupefied him '. . . *another proposition,'* inferring that there had been plenty of others; *'...it will pay even better.' '*. . . meet me at the usual place . . ."

A film of perspiration broke out on his forehead.

To Abbott it would be just the evidence he wanted – and he had brought it into the Yard himself! He might well have left his coat on a peg and gone to try to see Chatworth, which was his chief reason for coming. He stared down, studying the 'K' more closely; it was a carefully formed letter; the whole note had been written by someone who knew how to use a pen. It was in drawing ink, jet black and vivid against the white paper.

He screwed it up, with the envelope, turned, and placed it carefully in the middle of the glowing embers of the fire. It began to scorch but took a long time to blaze up. He heard someone approaching and turned with his back to the fire. As he did so the paper caught alight, making a flame bright enough to cast his shadow on the nearest desk. If someone came in and saw it they might try to retrieve the evidence.

The man outside passed, footsteps ringing on the cement floor. Roger went hot, then cold, and quickly stirred the blazing paper with his toe. In a few seconds it was just black ash, glowing red in places and giving off a few sparks which were drawn up the chimney. More at ease, he went to an easy chair, to recover from the shock and to face the obvious fact: the envelope had been put in his pocket either at the house or in the taxi.

Chapter 5

NO WELCOME FOR ROGER

No one came to the office.

Roger sat in an armchair, of faded green hide, his feet stretched out in front of him. Nothing seemed quite real and the appearance of the note in his pocket was fantastic. He could remember every word and every characteristic of the lettering, the quality of the white paper, and its thickness – pre-war paper beyond any doubt. Later, it might have been useful to have, but it had been too dangerous to hold on to it.

Abbott must have searched the raincoat, so it had not been there at five o'clock. No one had been in Bell Street except his friends and the police. The thought that Morgan might have put it there did not occur to him. The more he considered it the more convinced he was that the soft-voiced stranger of the taxi had inserted it as he had climbed out of the cab. He went back over the sequence of events. He had not known for certain that he had been followed, but had not been surprised when the man had appeared – in fact, he had assumed it was the plain-clothes officer. The soft-voiced fellow must have followed him, intent on slipping that damning note into his pocket.

He stood up abruptly and went to the door.

Chatworth's office was on the next floor. Roger walked briskly to the stairs and met two Detective-Inspectors coming down. At sight of him they looked surprised and, when he said 'hallo,' answered indifferently; glancing back from the landing he saw them still standing at the foot of the stairs, staring up at him, and as they went off he could hear their whispering voices. Along Chatworth's corridor a door opened and Superintendent Bliss, vast and fat and with a voice like a dove, almost knocked into him.

"West!" he exclaimed.

"Yes?" said Roger, eyeing him steadily.

"Oh, nothing," said Bliss and hurried off, while two men in the office stared at the door and Roger as if at something strange.

Tight-lipped, Roger went on to Chatworth's office. There was a light under the door and he could hear Eddie Day's sing-song voice. At the best of times it was unwise to interrupt Chatworth and Roger decided to wait until the A.C. was alone, although he was determined to try to force an issue. By coming here, he had at least shown confidence.

Two corridors away was a common-room, for higher officials when on fire-duty. It had a billiard table, table tennis, darts and all the paraphernalia of a club – it was Chatworth's special concern, and he had overcome many obstacles in getting it established. Nearing the door Roger could hear the murmur of voices and then an exclamation and a burst of laughter. He went in and walked across the room without speaking or drawing attention to himself. Someone looked up from the billiard table and he heard his name

uttered *sotto voce*. Two other men turned to stare at him. Others, by the walls playing chess and draughts, two card parties and table-tennis players, all stopped just long enough for him to realise that they were staring at him before going on with their games.

He felt the blood flooding his cheeks.

No one spoke to him and he made no attempt to start a conversation. Among the two dozen men there were many older than he but in less exalted positions; their envy had always been apparent, for he had been resented as the youngest Chief Inspector at the Yard. But the grim silence was not wholly due to their resentment, although doubtless it contributed to the willingness with which many of them judged him. One, a fair-headed, youthful-looking man, Inspector Cornish, who had recently been promoted from one of the Divisions, was the nearest approach to a close friend that Roger had at the Yard. He was the only one then on duty who might risk helping him.

Cornish, reading an evening paper in a corner, looked up, coloured and then averted his eyes. Roger stared at him for an appreciable time, but Cornish continued to study the paper. With an exclamation of disgust, Roger turned on his heel. He was by the door when he heard his name called and, looking over his shoulder, saw Cornish hurrying towards him, his fresh face alive with concern. The others looked at him in surprise and Cornish, stopping in front of Roger, spoke breathlessly.

"Damn this, Roger! You know what's being said?"

"And believed, as far as I can judge," said Roger.

"Is there any truth in it?" Cornish demanded.

"Would you expect me to admit it?" asked Roger and then repented the bitterness of his reply and forced a smile. "You ought to know better than to think there might be, Corny. No, it's a *canard* and it will be killed one day. Then what will all my good friends say when they come begging *Superintendent* West for favours?" He looked contemptuously round the room and felt suddenly untroubled by the hostility and the strength of the feeling against him. He would have felt pretty strongly had someone else been in his position; it was absurd to rely on sentiment. These men believed that he had committed the cardinal crime in a policeman's calendar; they had no time for a renegade and it was natural that they should feel strongly. He went on, sounding almost gay. "You'd better be careful, Corny, or you'll be looked upon as an accessory. Good night!"

He went out, hearing the murmur of conversation which followed, and he was not surprised when the door opened again and Cornish hurried after him.

"Roger. *Roger!"* The other was distressed and Roger turned and waited for him, his hands in his coat pocket, a faint smile on his lips. "Look here, old man," said Cornish, "just answer me this – *did* you do it?"

"No," said Roger, looking into the other's blue eyes.

"Then is there anything I can do?" demanded Cornish.

Roger warmed towards him as he considered, but he said, carefully, that

in Cornish's position it would probably be wise to show no friendliness but to go with the crowd. Cornish shook his head impatiently.

"I've tried that and it didn't work," he said. "I've never felt such a swine as I did just now."

Roger chuckled. "That's all right! Look here, if you really want to be helpful you can try to find out the name and address of the taxi-driver who picked me up at Sloane Square about three-quarters of an hour ago and dropped me here. I shared the cab with a man going to Piccadilly." That was all he dared ask; the two fivers were too dangerous to disclose to anyone here.

"How will it help?" Cornish asked.

"I'm not going to let you get involved with details," Roger said, "but if you can find out just the cabby's name and address, I'll be grateful. Don't take this to heart," he added, cheerfully, "it won't last for ever!"

He went on his way reflecting ruefully that Cornish, not he, might have been the victim of this remarkable quirk of circumstances and he was smiling to himself when he turned the corner and saw Chatworth, a large, burly man with a long mackintosh which rustled about his legs, and a wide-brimmed hat – nearly but not quite a Stetson. His large, rounded features were set in a scowl, by no means unusual. His natural colour was brick-red.

"Good evening, sir," said Roger.

Chatworth raised his massive head and stared at him. He was holding the key in his hand and about to lock his office door. He dwarfed Roger, who was nearly six feet tall and comfortably proportioned. Roger stood waiting, with a tentative smile on his lips, because he knew that that was the last thing Chatworth would expect. He no longer felt inwardly nervous of the A.C.; anger had killed that, and now a new-found determination dictated his attitude.

Chatworth put the key in his pocket and demanded: "And what do you imagine you are doing here, West?"

"I've come for two things," Roger said. "First, an interview with you, sir, and second to apply for a release from duty for four weeks."

"Oh," said Chatworth, ominously, "you want release from duty, do you? Confound your impertinence, you are suspended from duty!"

"That's news to me," said Roger, mildly. "I've had no notification."

Chatworth thrust his chin forward, narrowed his eyes, often round and deceptively wondering and innocent, a snare for the unsuspecting. Roger's heart was beating very fast.

"No, you haven't," Chatworth admitted, a flash of honesty which was characteristic of the man who wanted no cheap triumphs. "It isn't dated until tomorrow morning. You're being clever, are you, West? You think you can apply for release and escape the stigma of suspension. You're wrong."

"Perhaps," Roger said. "I've been wrong about so many things that nothing will surprise me."

"What do you mean?" snapped Chatworth.

"I had always been under the impression that your men would receive

scrupulously fair treatment," Roger said, restraining his anger and yet feeling less detached. "It was quite a shock to find it otherwise, sir."

"You had your opportunity to discuss this with me," Chatworth said. He stood by the door, feet planted wide apart, his mackintosh draped about him like a night-shirt which was too large. He pushed back the big hat and revealed his high forehead and the front of his bald head. At the sides was a thick fringe of close curls, blonde turning grey.

"I had no such thing," said Roger.

"You appear to be forgetting yourself," Chatworth said, coldly. "You were requested by Superintendent Abbott to come here to see me, and you refused. You were insolent to a superior officer, also."

"In the same circumstances I should be 'insolent' to any man who invaded the privacy of my home, adopted an arrogant and overbearing manner and tried to take advantage of his position," Roger said, more calmly, "and Superintendent Abbott appears to have misrepresented the facts, sir. He did not say that you wished to see me, he merely asked me to go with him for questioning. As I knew nothing of the circumstances and he would not give me any information, I refused."

Chatworth regarded him steadily, sniffed and dug his hand into his pocket. He took out the key, unlocked the door and pushed it open, striding into the room ahead of Roger, who followed without an invitation.

"Close the door," Chatworth barked as he walked to his flat-topped desk. Everything in the room was modern, most of the furniture was of tubular steel, filing cabinets and desk were of polished metal which looked like glass. There was concealed wall-lighting and a single desk-lamp, all of which were controlled by a main switch.

Chatworth unbuttoned his mackintosh but did not take it off. He put his hat on the desk in front of him and looked up at Roger, who was standing a couple of yards from the desk without expression. Chatworth pushed his lips forward, deliberated, and then said harshly: "I am extremely disappointed in you, West."

"And I in you, sir," said Roger, firmly.

"This is no occasion for back-chat!"

"It is a very serious matter for me," Roger said, "and I don't like the way it has been handled, sir. If a sergeant dealt with a parallel case in the same way I should severely reprimand him."

He had burned his boats, but Chatworth would think no worse of him for his attitude and it might enable him to force a hearing. He had won a minor triumph by getting into the room at all. He stood at ease, with one hand in his mackintosh pocket, and thought of the letter from 'K'.

Then Chatworth nearly floored him.

"Who broke into your house while Abbott was there?"

Roger took his hand from his pocket, drew a sharp breath and then, recovering, frowned and said with a fair simulation of surprise: "I don't understand you, sir."

"Yes you do," snapped Chatworth. "While Abbott was in your house

Lessing arrived and drummed on the piano while a man broke in through a first-floor window, and removed the evidence which Abbott went to find. Don't lie to me, West. You think that was clever, but it was a mistake."

"It's news to me," Roger insisted, quietly, "and to my knowledge there was never any evidence in my house which would convict me of accepting a bribe in my life. I don't know where you got your information, nor how long I have been suspect, but I do know that I think the methods adopted to trap me are disgraceful. You appear to have prejudged me, you've denied me the right to enter a defence. My best course, I think, is to refer the matter to the Home Secretary."

"Are you trying to *frighten* me?" growled Chatworth.

"I am giving you notice of my intention," said Roger, "which is more than you did for me." He paused but Chatworth did not answer, he simply sat back and stared at him; the desk-lamp shone on his polished cranium.

Looking at a man who had often been friendly and with whom he had worked for several years, one whom he had almost regarded with hero-worship, Roger felt a quickening tension. Until then, he had thought it possible – just possible – that Chatworth had deliberately planned to put him in bad odour, so that he could work surreptitiously. The last hope had faded. It should have been killed when he had found 'K's' note, which was proof of evil intent.

Now he saw the situation for what it was – absurd but highly dangerous. Chatworth was not an ogre, but a reasonable human being whose gruff manner was largely pose. Roger stepped forward and leaned against the desk, both hands planted on it.

"I know that you must have strong reasons for what you've done," he said, "but you might at least give me the opportunity to answer the allegations. My record at the Yard should entitle me to that, if nothing more. The case must be serious – apart from the ordinary seriousness of accepting bribes – or you wouldn't have been so arbitrary. You sent to my house believing you would find what you wanted. You failed. Abbott appears to have told you some cock-and-bull story about what happened there, but really, sir, it's fantastic." He saw Chatworth going even redder but did not pause. "If I were guilty of anything like this, I wouldn't be fool enough to keep evidence in my house, and nor—"

"That's enough, West," said Chatworth in a more reasonable tone. "Sit down." The invitation surprised Roger but he accepted and was further surprised when the other pushed a box of cigarettes towards him. He lit up and Chatworth bit the end off a half Corona. "For the first time I'm beginning to think I *might* be wrong," Chatworth went on. "What do you want four weeks' leave for?"

"To investigate this affair," Roger said. "It needs it badly enough!"

"Ye-es." Chatworth unlocked a drawer in his desk and drew out a manilla folder. Roger, feeling more at ease, leaned back and drew on his cigarette. The office was quiet except for the rustling of papers as Chatsworth turned them over. Then he glanced up and said sharply: "How do you account for

seven payments of two hundred and fifty pounds paid into your account at the Mid-Union Bank, Westminster, during the last three months? Cash payments, always one-pound notes. Where did you get the money?"

Roger was stupefied. "It isn't true!" he protested.

"Now, come, West! I have seen the account, talked to the cashier and the manager. Your wife made the payments."

"Nonsense!" said Roger, roundly.

"Are you telling me that you don't know what money there is in your account?"

"I use the Mid-Union Bank only for occasional transactions," Roger said, "as a supplementary to my main account at Barclays, Chelsea. I've sent no credit to Mid-Union for at least six months. Nor has my wife."

Chatworth looked at him oddly.

"Be careful, West," he said. "Look at that."

He handed a bank paying-in book across the desk. It was a small one, with half the pages torn out, leaving only the counter-foils. In a daze, Roger took it and saw that the first entries were in his handwriting – the book was undoubtedly his. He glanced through it, seeing a payment of fifty pounds which he had made in the September of the previous year. From then on – beginning in the middle of January – there were the payments which Chatworth had mentioned. The official stamp of the Mid-Union Bank, with initials scrawled across it, was there and the name at the top of each counterfoil was his.

Roger turned the counterfoils, his interest increasing. The first shock over, he was able to study the writing and he noticed the regular lettering, it was almost copper-plate writing, *such as the man who had signed himself* K *might have written.*

"Well?" demanded Chatworth.

"And my wife is supposed to have made these payments?" asked Roger, only to shake his head. "No, sir, it just didn't happen. Oh, the money has been paid in, they've taken a lot of trouble to frame me, haven't they?" He smiled, looking almost carefree. "I suppose someone representing herself to be my wife made the calls?"

"The description of the woman in every case is identifiable with your wife," Chatworth said.

"The description of any pretty, dark-haired woman with a flair for dressing well would do for that," Roger retorted.

"You seem remarkably pleased with yourself," said Chatworth.

Roger smiled. "I *am* pleased, sir! This is obviously one of your main items of evidence. My wife didn't visit the bank and the cashier will say so when he sees her, so there's evidence in my favour which even you will have to admit." He half-regretted the 'even you' but Chatworth did not appear to take umbrage. "You'll arrange for the cashier to see her, won't you?"

"Ye-es," said Chatworth. He leaned back and closed one eye. His pendulous jowl pressed against his collar, only half of which was visible. "You're *remarkably* smug," he remarked, "you could have sent another

young woman and be sure that—"

Roger laughed. "Aren't you letting yourself be carried away, sir?"

Chatworth opened his eyes abruptly.

"What did you say?"

"If I were to advance a theory like that, without evidence, you would tell me not to be a fool," Roger said, still on the crest of a wave of optimism. "Someone else paid that money into my account and whoever it was can be found. When she's found we'll have the answer to all this – I've an opportunity of escaping from the worst, you see! May I ask what other evidence you have?"

Chatworth said in a strained voice: "West, are you a consummate liar or do you seriously suggest that you have been framed?"

"Obviously, I've been framed," said Roger, warmly, "and it's been done very cleverly. I wish I knew just how it had developed; if I'd known from the first I might have prevented it from getting so serious." He shrugged. "You can't have any dependable evidence or you wouldn't have waited so long before taking action. You can't charge me or you would have done by now. May I have four weeks' leave of absence, sir?"

"I don't know," said Chatworth, and then shot another snap question. "When did you arrange for Morgan to break into your house?"

With anyone else, Roger might have given himself away, but for years he had been used to such unexpected questions and he had trained himself never to let Chatworth take him off his guard. His mood changed, however, but he felt sure that Morgan would have made no admissions, so he answered promptly: "I didn't."

"Morgan's finger-prints were found in your bedroom this afternoon and he was seen visiting you this evening."

"There's no reason why his prints shouldn't be there," Roger said, blandly, "he's visited me often enough."

"Do you usually take visitors to your bedroom?"

"Frequently," Roger replied. "If I've been working at night I don't get up very early, and Morgan has been helpful recently on several cases. He's a very useful man," he added, quickly, "and as soon as I knew what Abbott was after, I asked him to help me."

"Help you to do what?"

"Find the answer to this," Roger said promptly.

"I see," said Chatworth. He closed one eye again and looked at the ceiling. His fingers, covered with a mat of fair hair, drummed on the polished surface of the desk and Rogers waited with growing tension, at once hopeful and afraid.

Chapter 6

THE LADY SO BEAUTIFUL

"Go on," urged Mark Lessing.

"What else did he say?" demanded Janet, breathlessly.

"Not a great deal," said Roger, who had told them the story of his interview with Chatworth up to the moment when he had discussed Pep Morgan's part. "Apparently Pep's story bore mine out and the denial that you'd been paying the cash in floored him, I think. He was quite reasonable, as far as it goes—"

Roger grimaced. "In the circumstances, suspension was the only thing, leave of absence wouldn't do, and he's right, of course. He gave me the impression that he expects me to get around a bit and will be prepared to listen to the evidence."

"So I should think!" exclaimed Janet. "I'll never like that man again."

"Oh, I don't know," said Roger. "Those entries, occasional rumours from Joe Leech"—he uttered the bookmaker's name very softly—"and other indications all pointing towards me, must have made it look pretty black."

"I'll 'pretty black' him!" said Janet, warmly, but her eyes were much brighter than when Roger had returned, half an hour before.

It was nearly midnight but none of them looked tired and there was a kettle singing on the hob and an empty teapot warming by the fire. Roger was sitting back in an easy chair wriggling his toes inside his slippers. Mark was opposite him, and Janet was curled up on a settee between the two armchairs.

"He didn't tell you who's supposed to have bribed you?" inquired Mark.

"No-o," admitted Roger, slowly, "he was reticent about that, which probably means that he doesn't know for certain, but that he thinks the case hasn't really broken open yet. He didn't say much more," he repeated, "but a few generalities suggested that this business is supposed to have been going on since about Christmas, when I hit upon some particularly bright racket and accepted bribes and held my tongue. Abbott's been working on the case from the beginning."

"Abbott!" exclaimed Janet, scornfully.

"It wasn't a pleasant job," said Roger, "and—"

"You'd find an excuse for Hitler!" said Janet. "There are limits to the spirit of forgiveness."

"Oh, I don't know," interjected Mark. "Better too much than too little, and although no one loves Abbott, he's good at his particular brand of inquiry. And when the cashier has said 'no' about Janet, we'll feel better. You learned nothing else at all?"

"Not from Chatworth. Eddie Day gave me Joe Leech's name and Cornish promised to find the taxi-driver." He had told them briefly of the note from

'K' and his assumptions. "If I can find out where the other passenger went, it might help. We aren't exactly barren of clues," he continued, slowly. "The copper-plate writing and the paper—I wish I'd kept the envelope but I was too scared!—the drawing-ink, Joe Leech and the woman who's paid the cash in, and those five-pound notes. With luck and hard going we'll get through. I wish—" he paused.

"If wishing were doing," murmured Mark.

"I wish I knew *why* it's been done," said Roger. "That's one of the things at which Chatworth boggles more than anything else – as anyone would. Why should there be a deliberate attempt to frame me? I've been over the possible revenge motives, but Pep's right, no one's come out of stir lately who would be rich enough to try it. In any case, it's too fantastic a notion. Yet"—he smiled worriedly—"there must be a reason."

The kettle began to boil and he leaned forward and poured water in the pot, after making sure that the tea was inside this time. There were some sandwiches on a tray, and Mark bit into one, thoughtfully.

"The reason why," he murmured. "That seems to be the first thing to discover, Roger. Shall I cast my great mind about?"

"Not yet, thanks!" said Roger, as if horrified, and when Mark took on an expression of affronted dignity added: "Your first job, if you'll take it, is to interview Joe Leech. Joe will be smart enough to outwit Pep."

Mark grinned. "For that oblique compliment, many thanks! Er—Roger?" He bit again into a sandwich.

"Yes?" asked Roger, sipping tea.

"One little thing you might have forgotten," Mark said, "and it could be significant. I mean, the attempt to bring Janet into this. The first assumption might be that it was just to stiffen the evidence against you, but it might also mean that the whole family is to be involved."

Roger frowned. "I can't think it's likely," he commented. "Did I say that Chatworth is going to send Cornish with you to the Mid-Union tomorrow, Jan? I think he's afraid you will scratch Abbott's eyes out!"

He laughed, and the atmosphere, already very much easier, grew almost gay. The tension at the house while Roger had been out had been almost unbearable. It had been broken only by a telephone call from Pep Morgan, who had reported his encounter with Tiny Martin and told Mark that he had gone to the Yard and been questioned. He had been asked whether he had been at Bell Street earlier in the day, as well as to the reason why he had gone that night. Pep, it proved, had answered on similar lines to Roger and had been released with a sombre warning from Abbott to 'be careful'. Pep, said Mark, had seemed quite cheerful and eager to know when he was to start work. Mark had promised to call him in the morning.

They went to bed just after one o'clock, and surprisingly, Roger went to sleep quickly, but Janet lay awake a long while, listening to his heavy breathing and to Mark snoring in the spare room.

Mark was up first and disturbed the others by whistling in his bath. They breakfasted soon after eight o'clock and, just after nine, Mark left for the

East End. Roger was tempted to go with Janet to the Mid-Union Bank, but thought it wiser to wait at Chelsea. She left soon after ten o'clock, met Cornish at Piccadilly and received the paying-in book from him and, at the small branch of the provincial bank, made out a credit entry for fifty pounds, in cash, which Roger had taken out of his safe.

Cornish was nowhere in sight when she paid it in.

In spite of all the circumstances and her knowledge that she had never been inside the bank before, she felt on edge. The cashier was a middle-aged man with beetling brows; there was something sinister about him, about the tapping of a typewriter behind a partition and the cold austerity of the little bank itself. The cashier peered at her over the tops of steel-rimmed spectacles, counted the notes carefully, stamped the book and handed it back to her.

"Good-morning, madam," he said.

"Good-morning, "gasped Janet, and hurried out, feeling stifled.

She did not see Cornish immediately, but one of the Yard sergeants was near at hand. She went, by arrangement, to the Regent Palace Hotel and, finding a vacant seat in the public lounge, waited on tenterhooks. After twenty minutes Cornish came hurrying in, smiling cheerfully. Her spirits rose.

"Hallo, Mrs. West!" Cornish reached her, his smile widening. "You'll be glad to hear that he has never seen you before!"

Janet drew a deep breath.

"Thank heavens for that!" she exclaimed, sitting back and beaming into Cornish's eyes. "I was half afraid that—" she broke off and forced a laugh. "But I mustn't be absurd!"

"I've telephoned the Yard, so that's all right," Cornish said. "You'll have some coffee, won't you?"

"Er—oh, thank you," Janet said, "but I must let Roger know. I'll phone from here, and come back."

She hurried off; tall, well-dressed and graceful, she attracted the gaze of several men. Roger answered the call promptly and she knew from his sharp 'hallo' that he was equally anxious. She wasted no time.

"Well, that's item one!" he said, fervently. "Chatworth ought to start feeling ashamed of himself! I was half afraid the cashier—"

"So was I," said Janet. "I suppose we'll imagine significant happenings everywhere until it's over. I mustn't stop, darling, Cornish is being very sweet and he's getting some coffee."

"Remind him to find that cabby's address, will you?" Roger asked. "Good-bye, my sweet!"

Smiling, he stepped from the telephone to the window and looked out. One of Abbott's men was still on duty there – they did not intend to take chances. He felt like laughing at them, much happier now that he had a chance to fight back. Once the initial suspicion was gone, the whole organisation of the Yard would support him.

He hummed to himself as he lit a cigarette and then, frowning slightly,

saw a powerful limousine drawing up outside the house. The driver glanced about him as if looking for the name of a house before pulling up immediately opposite Roger's.

Abbott's man, betraying no interest, strolled along the opposite pavement.

A chauffeur climbed down from the car and opened the rear door. There was a pause before a woman stepped out.

Roger stared in sheer amazement, she was so entrancingly lovely. She wore a massive fox fur over a tailored suit of black; the morning was bright, although there were occasional clouds, but with the sun shining her hair glistened, black as ebony under her small hat. The gleaming car beyond her, the chauffeur standing to attention, combined to make a remarkable tableau.

Through the open window, Roger heard her say: "I will go, Bott."

'Bott' seemed to echo. Her voice was husky, the sun glistened on her white teeth. She walked up the little path – the small drive was on the other side of the garden – and the chauffeur stood at attention by the gate. As she disappeared from Roger's sight, the front-door bell rang.

"Now what?" exclaimed Roger.

Before he went into the hall he smoothed his hair down and straightened his tie. When he opened the door he was smiling, but the radiant loveliness of his visitor had a breath-taking quality.

"Good morning," he said.

"Is Mrs. West in, please?" asked the woman.

"I'm afraid not," said Roger, "but I'm her husband."

The woman said: "You are Chief Inspector West?" When he nodded she smiled, not widely but with a hint of surprise, perhaps admiring surprise. Roger felt vague on the point; he only knew that he was looking at a really beautiful woman, whose poise was as admirable as her make-up was superb.

"Yes," he repeated. "Will you come in?"

She hesitated and then said: "I really wanted to see Mrs. West, but—"

When he stepped aside, she entered the hall and, at his invitation went into the lounge, every movement considered and graceful. Disarmed at first, Roger grew wary as she loosened the fur and smiled upon him and sat down in Janet's chair. "Will you please tell her that I called?" she asked.

"Yes," said Roger. "Whom shall I say?"

"Mrs. Cartier," said the woman and took a card from her bag. "Mr. West, I wonder if you will give me *your* support?" The appeal was warm and personal. She expected to get her own way, and one could see that she used her beauty as a weapon, probably finding that it rarely failed to serve her purpose. Her eyes were brown and limpid, framed by long dark lashes. She spoke without an accent but with a precision often noticeable in foreigners; and her voice was charming. "It is such a good cause," she added, "and I was told that Mrs. West would probably be very valuable to us."

"Us?" queried Roger, who had not looked at her card.

"Yes, to the Society," said Mrs. Cartier.

Roger glanced at the card, which was engraved: *'Mrs. Sylvester Cartier, President, the Society of European Relief, Welbeck Street, W.1.* He had heard of

the Society, which, when it had first been formed, had been visited by Yard officials to make sure of its *bona fides.* He remembered that it was registered as a War Charity and that its patrons included some of the most distinguished names in *Who's Who,* although its activities were, as yet, strictly limited.

Janet worked for several welfare societies, and he assumed that Mrs. Cartier had obtained her name from one of them and was canvassing for support. And yet he frowned as he looked at her, for he could not help feeling that her visit on this particular morning was a remarkable coincidence. He remembered that Janet had said that they would be reading sinister qualities in the most innocent matters; this was probably an example.

"How can my wife help you?" he asked.

"Her enthusiasm and organising ability are so well known," said Mrs. Sylvester Cartier. "I have been told that she is quite exceptional. You know of our Charity, of course?"

"I've heard of it," admitted Roger.

"Then you will help to persuade her?"

Roger said: "I think I should know more of what you want her to do, Mrs. Cartier."

"But that is so difficult to explain," she said, "there is a great deal of work. Our Society will make great efforts to assist the professional classes of the European nations, Mr. West. So many organisations cater for the ordinary people, but the professional classes – I am sure you will agree – need help just as badly, they must be rehabilitated"—she pronounced that word carefully, as if she had rehearsed frequently and yet was not really sure of it—"and enabled to contribute towards the great work of reconstruction in their own countries. I will not weary you with details, but, please – *do* ask her to consider my appeal for her services most sympathetically. I am always at the office in the afternoon, between two and four o'clock." She rose quickly and smiled as she extended her gloved hand. "I won't keep you longer, Mr. West, thank you so much. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye," said Roger, faintly.

Janet would have accused him of being in a daze as he saw her out and watched her get into the car. The chauffeur tucked the rug about her, closed the door and went round to his seat. The car, a Daimler, purred off and revealed the Yard man on the other side of the road.

"Well, well," said Roger, "I wonder what Janet will say?"

It was a little after eleven o'clock and he did not expect Janet back until after twelve. He leaned back in his easy chair, his eyes closed, and tried to concentrate on his immediate problem, but Mrs. Sylvester Cartier had left behind a subtle perfume and, from time to time, he saw her face in his mind's eye. He rebuked himself but it persisted until he grew really absorbed in more urgent problems.

The payments to the Mid-Union Bank had started in mid-January. From that time – perhaps a few weeks before – someone had decided to try to

destroy his reputation and, at best, to get him drummed out of the Yard. He had dismissed the possibility that it was revenge, but there must be some reason and he could imagine only that, about four months earlier, he had made some discovery which, if he followed it up, would have startling results. He wished that Janet or Mark were here so that he could talk with them; his mind needed the stimulus of argument.

"Some unwitting discovery," he mused, "something which made me more dangerous than a policeman would normally be – oh, Lord, it's incredible!"

But there was no other reasonable theory and he began to recall his activities in December. He had finished off three minor cases of burglary, one of forgery, with Eddie Day's help, one sordid murder case, and he had made some inquiries into aliens living in England and whose activities were suspect in some quarters. Aliens – and he remembered the cases clearly – who had succeeded in proving their good behaviour. Aliens—

He sat up abruptly. *Aliens* and the Society of European Relief! What a fool he had been not to see that connection before. Mrs. Cartier might be English by marriage but she had almost certainly been born an alien. Others connected with the Society might be as well, one of his inquiries might have touched upon the Society.

In a mood of excitement he began to trace back again, trying to remember every visit he had made, every name which had been suspect. 'Cartier' was not among them, yet even that held a French ring.

Yet would the woman have come and risked setting up such a train of thought? If the mystery concerned the Society, she would surely realise that it might start him thinking, and she might even know of his plight.

Alternating between scepticism and optimism, he went to the writing-desk and began to make out a list of names, stopping only when his memory failed him. He grew so absorbed that even when Janet had not returned by one o'clock, he did not pause to wonder why she was so late. Nor did he wonder what progress Mark was making.

Chapter 7

THE FEARS OF JOE LEECH

A noticeable figure in that squalid part of London, Mr. Lessing strode along the Street of Ninety-Nine Bridges, not far from London Bridge. He seemed unaware of the dirt, the smells from small shops and markets, the grime which floated from the river and the spectral outlines of burned-out warehouses. Now and again he passed rows of hovels, some of them with the doors and windows open, most of them tightly closed and looking forlorn. Tugs hooted mournfully on the river. Covered gangways connecting one warehouse with another crossed the narrow street at intervals. Quays and locks, crossed by revolving bridges, were passed with depressing frequency. Now and again, he looked over the side of a bridge and saw the green slime on water, undisturbed for many months, where the devastation of the raids had made repair work useless. Yet there was a great hustle of activities, many voices were raised, horses and lorries passed along the cobbles in what seemed an endless stream.

Mark walked on, as if oblivious of it all.

Many people believed that he was as disdainful as he appeared; that, Mark declared, was a *canard*; at heart he was a simple soul, as much at home in the East End as in the West End. His fastidiousness of dress made that seem improbable and few East-Enders would have trusted him without knowing him. One or two did so, knowing him well, but Joe Leech was only slightly acquainted with him.

Mark reached Rose Street, a narrow turning off the Street of Ninety-Nine Bridges. Its houses were squat and ugly, but, halfway along it, were two larger buildings – one a school, the other a public house. The latter, called for some incalculable reason the 'Saucy Sue', was a grey-faced, grim-looking Victorian edifice with its windows boarded up, for the glass had gone in the raids. In that small area of the East End, however, there had been comparatively little damage.

Joe Leech owned the Saucy Sue.

He did not work in the bar, although he did the buying and handled all the business with the breweries. He had a manager, a bald-headed, lantern-jawed individual named Clay, whose face was exactly the colour of clay and whose features had a trick of immobility which made them appear fashioned out of the same material. Clay was reputed to be the most saturnine man in the East End of London and it was said that he was the only man who had worked for Joe Leech for more than six months.

The Saucy Sue was not open to the public when Mark reached it, just after ten o'clock, but the front door was open and a young girl, with bright fair hair, was scrubbing the doorsteps. She had a sack tied about her waist and when she moved the pail of dirty, soapy water, she had to get

laboriously to her knees in order to lift it. Mark saw her struggling with it from some distance along the street and scowled; he had strong views on child labour.

When he drew nearer he saw that she was older than he had thought, but painfully thin. He stopped and, when she grew aware of his shadow, she looked up and brushed the hair back from her eyes. She had a smudge of dirt on the side of her nose but the rest of her face was scrubbed clean and looked rosy. Her round bright eyes regarded him curiously, but with hostility.

"Hallo," said Mark.

"Watcher want?" demanded the girl, pertly.

"Is Mr. Leech in?"

"Dunno," she said.

"Oh, come," protested Mark, "you know if—"

"I said I dunno an' I means I dunno," said the girl, "and it ain't no use arsting me, mister. If yer wants ter know anyfink, wot's the matter wiv' going inside?" She pointed towards the open door and then dipped her work-grimed hand into the water. Mark, a little disgruntled after having been full of sympathy for the child, shrugged his shoulders and stepped over the threshold of the pub.

A man appeared from behind the bar. He was polishing glasses and behind him the brasses of the taps and the little faucets at the end of the wine and spirit bottles glistened in spite of the gloomy interior. The floor was freshly strewn with sawdust.

"Watcher want Mr. Leech for?" demanded the saturnine Clay.

"Is he in?" asked Mark.

"You ain't answered me question."

"I don't propose to," said Mark, sharply. "I want to see Leech.

If you're a wise man, you'll tell him so and be quick about it." For the girl he had some sympathy, but for Clay he had none. The man regarded him with dull eyes and shrugged his sloping shoulders.

"Can't see Mr. Leech wivvaht a good reason."

"I have a good reason," Mark insisted.

"If yer 'ave, wot is it?"

Mark put his head on one side and regarded Clay in thoughtful silence for a long time. The harsh, monotonous sound of scrubbing came from another room. Clay continued to stare, but finally admitted defeat, opening his lips but closing them again before he demanded grudgingly:

"'S'yer nime?"

"Lessing," Mark said. "Mark Lessing."

"An' you've got business wiv' Mr. Leech?"

"Now there's no need to go into that again," said Mark, impatiently. "I want to see him on important business and I haven't any time to waste."

"Ar," said Clay, and then shrugged. "Wait a minnit." He turned and walked stiffly to a closed door and pushed through it. Outside, feminine voices were raised, and he grinned when he heard a woman say: "Got a torf

ter see yer, duck?"

"Wot, me see *'im?'* demanded the girl with the pail. "Not on yer life, watcher tike me for?"

"'Oo's 'e want?" another woman demanded.

"Ole Nick," declared Lizzie, and refused to go further into the question. The older woman tried to persuade her but she went on silently with her work. Mark lit a cigarette, frowned when Clay did not return after five minutes, then heard more footsteps on the pavement. A quavering voice, that of an old man, demanded: "You open yet, Lizzie?"

"Gam kiss yerself!" snapped Lizzie. "'S'use o' worritting me ev'ry morning, we ain't open an' you know it an' you won't git a drink until twelve o'clock. Git aht've my way, I'm busy!"

"Now, Lizzie," remonstrated the man with the quavering voice, "I was only arsting a civil question wot wants a civil answer." He lowered his voice but twice in the course of the next sentence it squeaked. "Seen the Masher arahnd?"

"No, I ain't!"

"If I could see Joe I could tell 'im a thing or two," declared the ancient, "if 'e knew what I knew he wouldn't mind lettin' me 'ave one now an' agen." Mark imagined him nodding his head sagely, and heard Lizzie's unprintable retort, followed by the shuffling footsteps of the old man. He stepped to the door. Ten yards along the street the man was walking slowly, sliding his feet along the pavement. The heels of his boots were worn down to the uppers, his trousers were ragged and patches were coming away from the stitches. His shirt – he wore no coat – was filthy. He wore a pair of braces and the back tongues were pinned to the top of his trousers; he was muttering audibly to himself. He turned into a little house twenty yards farther on, and Mark was watching him thoughtfully when he was startled by Clay's voice, behind him.

"'E ain't in," Clay said. "'S'no use."

Mark said: "Are you quite sure, Clay?"

"I said so, didn't I?"

"Strangely enough I don't believe you," said Mark, smiling. "Which room is he in?" He took two half-crowns from his pocket and held them on the palm of his hand.

"'E ain't in," snarled Clay, "if yer was to offer me a fiver I couldn't tell yer where 'e is. 'E ain't in – you clear aht!"

One of the remarkable things about Joe Leech was the fact that normally he made himself available to any caller. A good purveyor of inside information had to be catholic in his friends, and Mark knew his reputation. As well as being the owner of the Saucy Sue and a bookmaker, he was a 'commission agent'. He handled all manner of strange commodities and took commission on an astonishing variety of transactions. The only times when he was unapproachable were during periods when he had squealed to the police and vengeful toughs were out for his blood. His philosophy of life was that anger burned out, and if one kept out of the way for a few days trouble

would blow over. Then Joe Leech, short, plump, and gaudily dressed, would decorate the drab streets again.

"You lie much too easily," said Mark, scornfully, "I'm going to see Leech." He pushed past the man and reached the door. Clay uttered an obscene oath and jumped towards him, but Mark slipped through the doorway and hurried up the narrow wooden stairs comfortably ahead of the stiff-moving manager. The house smelt of beer and decaying vegetables. There was a narrow landing with three closed doors and he wondered which of them was Joe Leech's.

"... murder yer!" Clay was bellowing.

Mark opened one door; the room beyond was a bedroom, the bed unmade. He closed it and opened a second door as Clay climbed laboriously to the top of the stairs. Why he did not attempt violence Mark hardly knew, but he stopped at the landing, breathing vengeance, as Mark looked into a long, narrow room. It was a parlour crowded with cheap modern furniture and with wallpaper so gaudy that it was an offence to the eye.

Sitting at a table at the far end of the room was Joe Leech, a vision in puce pyjamas, with tousled hair, blood-shot eyes and sagging cheeks. There were two curious things about Joe; the visible one was his small, cupid's mouth, soft and womanish; the audible one his pure tenor voice, not childish yet certainly not manly. He was proud of being self-educated and affected a horror of the Cockney accent; his was a neutral one and usually he managed most of his aspirates.

Mark left the door open and stepped towards the man, who had a table-drawer open, pushed against his stomach, and his right hand hidden inside the drawer.

"Why, Joe!" exclaimed Mark. "What's all the to-do about? I only want a word with you." He smiled amiably and Joe snatched his hand from the drawer and slammed it to; it caught at one side and gave Mark the opportunity of seeing an automatic lying there. Then Joe slammed it home and demanded shrilly: "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Don't say you don't recognise me," protested Mark. "We've met before, Joe. What's frightening you?"

Joe gulped. "I—I—I'm not frightened, don't say I'm frightened, I'm not!"

"I thought I recognised all the symptoms," Mark said.

"If yer don't sling yer 'ook, mister, yer won't reckernise yer own dial," growled Clay, from behind him. The manager was approaching with a poker gripped in his right hand, his stiff movements holding a menace which made Mark back hastily to the wall. "Clear aht, will yer?"

"Tell him to go away, Joe," said Mark, sharply.

Joe darted a sidelong glance towards him, gulped again, and licked his lips. He stood up and rounded the table, putting a hand on Clay's arm.

"'S'all right, s'all right, Clay, I recognise Mr. Lessing now." He smiled weakly. "I didn't know who it was at first, if I'd known it was Mr. Lessing I'd have told you to show him up right away. You know I would, Mr. Lessing, don't you?"

"I would have been surprised if you hadn't," said Mark, smiling widely. "Shut the door behind you, Clay." He waited until the door was closed, choosing to ignore Joe's furtive movement towards a small cupboard, the opening of it and the clink of glass on glass. Joe's head jerked backwards as he poured a drink down his throat. Then he turned, a glass in one hand and a bottle of whisky in the other; on his face was a sickly grin.

"'Ave – have a drink, Mr. Lessing? I was up all night, so it's just a nightcap for me. I was going to 'ave—have forty winks just before you come. No peace for the wicked, is there?"

Mark eyed him sardonically.

"None at all, Joe," he said, "no peace for the wicked at all." He saw the bloodshot eyes widen and Joe's Adam's apple move convulsively. Then Joe grinned, painfully.

"You will 'ave"—this time he omitted the correction—"your little joke, Mr. Lessing, won't you? 'Ow's the Inspector – Handsome West? He was with you the last time you come here, wasn't he? I always said that you got a square deal from Mr. West and that goes for you, too. *Some* dicks—"

"Look here, Joe," said Mark, "you know why I've come and we're only wasting time. You got some information about West – or you thought you did. Where did it come from?"

"What, *me!"* Joe's voice rose to a shrill falsetto. "Why, I wouldn't let a friend down, Mr. Lessing, you ought to know I wouldn't. Ha-ha-ha!" His voice cracked half-way through the laugh and he glanced towards the whisky bottle, giving Mark the impression that he would like to pour the lot down his throat. "I like that, Mr. Lessing! Why, what's happened to the Inspector? Nothing gone wrong, I 'ope—hope."

"Talk quickly, Joe," said Mark gently.

"Why, I can't tell you a thing, Mr. Lessing! If someone has been spreading lies about Mr. West, it wasn't me. I don't spend time like that, I'm not a squealer. Listen to me, Mr. Lessing, I might be able to *help* you!" He raised the bottle high in a grand gesture. "What about that?" he demanded. "That's an idea, isn't it?"

"No," said Mark. "Who gave you information about him?"

Joe licked his lips.

"I tell you I don't know what—"

"Look here, Joe," said Mark, reasoningly, "you're frightened of your own shadow. The Masher will be—"

He dropped the word 'Masher' into the conversation simply because he had heard the old ancient outside use it and had wondered what it implied. But even he was astonished at its effect on Leech, who dropped heavily into his chair, his hands shaking, his leg knocking against the table. He raised the bottle to his lips and gulped; a trickle of whisky escaped them and ran down his chin, soaking into the neck of his pyjamas. When he put the bottle down he almost knocked it over.

"So the Masher frightens you," murmured Mark.

"You—you don't understand," muttered Leech, "you don't understand,

Mr. Lessing! There's a fella they call the Masher, 'e thinks I welshed him, says he's coming after me." His colour was grey and his grin positively nauseating. "'E'll learn the truth one o' these days and then it'll be all right. Mr. Lessing, if I was some people I'd ask the police for protection, that's what I would do, but I wouldn't sink so low, I *couldn't!* That's me, that's Joe Leech. I—I've got a 'eadache this morning and the Masher tried to beat me up last night and made me nervous, that's all; don't you start thinking I've done anything wrong."

"I know what you've done," said Mark, "and if the Masher is who I think he is, you'll get more than a beating up." He shrugged. "I might be able to help, but not unless—"

"'Ow'd *you* know the Masher?" gasped Joe Leech.

"I'm very interested in you and your friends and your enemies," Mark assured him. He stubbed out his cigarette and lit another. Leech did not smoke. "What name does he go by to you?"

Leech's little eyes narrowed.

"You sure you know him, Mr. Lessing?"

Mark laughed, ridiculing any doubts. "I know him well enough to have him put inside, Joe, and if he were inside he couldn't do you any harm, could he?"

Leech rose unsteadily from his chair, rounded the table and approached Mark. When he was a yard away the stench of whisky was nauseating. He stretched out a podgy hand and gripped Mark's coat, peering up into Mark's eyes.

"Mr. Lessing, you wouldn't lie to me," he said, hoarsely, "you wouldn't play such a trick on a man in my condition, would you? Look at me! Look at me hand!" He held out one hand and it shook violently. "I don't mind admitting I'm scared stiff, Mr. Lessing, but if you can put Malone inside I'd do anyfink for you, I would truly."

"Where did you get the information about West?" demanded Mark. "I'll look after Malone if you tell me that."

"I—I'd have to look up some records. I didn't get it direct," said Leech, backing away and narrowing his eyes craftily; "it would take me two or three days, Mr. Lessing. If you could put Malone away—"

"I will, when you've said your piece," said Mark.

"Now, listen, Mr. Lessing—"

From the street, floating clearly through the open window, there came the shrill blast of a whistle, not full enough for a police call. It broke the quiet outside and cut across Leech's words. He swung round and rushed to the table, pulled open the drawer and snatched up the automatic. His fingers were shaking so much that Mark stepped hastily to one side.

"That's him!" gasped Leech. "That's the Masher, he—"

There was a scurry of footsteps in the street. A woman cried out in alarm, someone swore, someone else laughed unpleasantly. A clattering sound followed and the swish of water and then a thud and a volley of oaths suggesting that someone had kicked over Lizzie's bucket. A heavy bang on

the bar door was followed by several others and footsteps sounded on the stairs, slow and deliberate – the approach of Clay.

"Save me!" gasped Leech. "Don't let them come in, don't let them come in!"

Downstairs, a door crashed open and footsteps clattered in the bar. A single loud crack, the breaking of a bottle, was followed by a pandemonium of breaking glass and strident, jeering laughter. Clay burst in, his grey face a sea of perspiration. He closed the door and shot home the bolt but before he reached Leech someone was hammering on the door. The uproar continued downstairs; judging from the sounds, bottles were being flung into the street.

"Open up, Joe," a man said, and Mark was surprised by the clearness with which the voice sounded above the din. "You'll only make it worse for yourself if you don't."

"Keep—keep them out!" gasped Joe. "Don't let them come in." He pointed the gun towards the door and his finger was unsteady on the trigger. After a pause a heavy blow splintered two of the door panels, the sharp point of a pick showed; it was wrenched away, then used again. By levering the pick, a hole was made. A hand poked through and groped about for the bolt.

Leech fired at the hand.

He missed by a foot; the bullet struck the wall on the side of the door but the hand was not withdrawn. The steadiness with which its owner sought for the bolt was an object lesson. Mark stepped swiftly to Leech and pushed his arm aside.

"Do you want to be charged with murder?" he snapped.

"Leave me alone!" Still holding the gun, Leech jumped away from him and fired again. He scored a glancing hit and blood welled on the man's finger but the bolt was pulled back and the door flung open. A man strode in, small, neat and flashily dressed. His dark, wavy hair was glistening with brilliantine, his narrow-featured face, handsome after a fashion, was twisted contemptuously. For an appreciable time he stood looking at Leech, who held the gun in trembling fingers but did not fire again. He looked too frightened to take any action, his teeth were knocking together like castanets.

"So you thought you'd keep me out," the newcomer said, harshly. His voice was cold and metallic. He strode across the room, a swagger in every step, the padded shoulders of his suit swaying. Clay reared up against the wall and stared at him, terrified. Leech drew in a shuddering breath and levelled the gun but the newcomer brushed it away contemptuously, as he held up his hand, from which the blood was streaming. "That's something else I owe you, Leech." He struck the bookmaker across the face and the blood from his wounded finger splashed into Leech's eyes and dripped on his pyjama jacket.

The pandemonium downstairs was increasing. A crowd had gathered outside and Mark thought there were several brawls in progress; the police

would surely arrive before very long. He stepped towards the newcomer, whom he assumed to be 'Masher' Malone, and said calmly: "Do you have to do this?"

Malone tinned and looked at him, dark eyes smouldering.

"Who're you?" he demanded.

"Not a friend of Joe's," said Lessing, "and—"

"It's a lie, it's a lie!" screeched Joe. "He said he could put you inside, Masher; he said he knew you and could put you inside! That's what he said!" He pointed a quivering finger at Mark, who grew suddenly aware of the menace in Malone's smouldering eyes. He knew that, true to his nature, Leech had seen a chance of buying safety with information. The snide went on shouting until Malone shot out a hand and struck him across the lips. Although he still held the gun, Leech made no attempt to use it. He backed against the wall, gasping and slobbering.

"Is that true?" Malone demanded.

"Do you often believe him?" countered Mark.

"Don't try to be funny." Malone suddenly shot out his hand. Apparently he expected Mark to be as hypnotised as Leech; certainly he did not expect Mark's quick evasive action, nor the clenched fist which knocked his hand aside. He did not change his expression, nor did he strike out again.

"Listen to me," said Mark, feeling anxious, "I came to see Leech on private business. He was frightened out of his wits by you. I told him I could put you inside to make him give me some information. Take it or leave it." He spoke with praiseworthy nonchalance.

Leech moaned: "It's a lie, Masher, he come to ask me about you, wanted to know more about you, said he could—"

From the landing there came a sharp report. Mark heard it and turned his head. He thought he saw a movement by the door but could not be sure; he did hear a man running down the stairs until the sound of his progress was drowned by the new outburst of noise below. He looked round – and there was Leech sliding down the wall, eyes wide open and terrified, hands clutching at his chest. He was breathing convulsively.

The Masher asked: "Who did that?" but stood sneering at the bookmaker as he slid to the floor and began to gasp for breath.

Chaper 8

ANXIETY FOR ROGER

Mark was fascinated by the sneering grin on Malone's face. He felt quite sure that the man had arranged the shooting so that he could not become deeply involved, the cynical question was a form of protection. Mark turned away from him and went down on his knees beside Leech, pillowing the man's head in his arm, and said, reassuringly: "It's all right, Joe. Clay, fetch a doctor and send someone here with some water and a towel." He opened the front of Leech's jacket, tightening his lips when he saw the little hole, oozing blood, just above the heart; he doubted whether a doctor would save the man's life. Malone stood leering, not speaking until Lizzie came in. She flounced past him, carrying an enamel pail of water and a towel. Mark glanced up in time to see Malone pull her hair. She jerked her head away, deposited the pail and towel and went out, making a wide detour to avoid the flash crook. At the door, she turned and put her tongue out, then disappeared.

Joe was muttering incoherently, but Mark had no hope that the words were about Roger. He stopped the bleeding by folding the towel and holding it over the wound but he felt helpless and out of his depth. He caught Malone's eye and the over-dressed man grinned at him. It was quieter downstairs but a shrill voice called: "Police!" The Masher made no attempt to get away but pushed his hands into his pockets and watched Leech's distorted face with cold sardonic interest. The plump body grew convulsed, Leech began to struggle and tried to shout – only to relax, gasping for breath before becoming very still. His eyes closed – opened again – and became fixed, with the fear reflected in them.

"He's croaked," said Malone. "Listen, you, there isn't much I don't know about Leech, and I'll sell what you want to know – at a price. Just ask for Masher Malone, you'll find me." He walked across the room and went out, without glancing behind him, as a stentorian voice bellowed up the stairs: "Leech! You up there, Leech?"

Clay, who was nearer the door, called stiffly: "He's been shot."

"Cripes!" exclaimed the man with the stentorian voice and he hurried up the stairs; Mark was not surprised to see his uniform as he entered. "So Joe's got it," the man said and looked curiously at Mark, as out of place there as a peacock in a poultry run. "Malone, don't you go," he called.

"I should worry," came Malone's voice.

"How'd it happen?" the policeman asked, taking it so calmly, that Mark knew he was not even mildly surprised. "Was it Malone?"

"Malone was in here when the shot came from the door," Mark said. "He didn't fire it."

"And doesn't know who did fire it, copper," Malone said from the door. "I

came to ask Leech some questions but before the louse could answer, someone who didn't like him got busy. Show me the guy and I'll handle him for you."

Mark could imagine the man's leering smile, looked towards the door and felt, as he imagined the policeman felt, that he was completely out of his depth. Other policemen arrived and statements were taken and, while Mark was making his, an ambulance and two police cars drew up, finger-print and camera men disgorged upon the Saucy Sue.

It was an hour before Mark was given permission to leave. None of the Divisional men recognised him or his name, to his satisfaction, for he did not want this affair associated with Roger until the latter had heard about it. He was glad, too, that the situation was taken out of his hands.

Clay spoke slowly when questioned, every word seemed an effort. Several times he looked towards the grotesque body of his master. Mark wondered what queer twist of loyalty had bound Clay to the bookmaker. Mark asked no questions and kept himself in the background; consequently he knew nothing of the extensive inquiries, although, when he reached the bar, he saw three plainclothes sergeants talking to three members of the pub's staff, who had recently arrived.

The broken glass had been swept to either side of the bar so as to make a path. The floor was swimming in beer and spirits and the stench was overpowering. The shelves were wrecked but one empty bottle stood untouched near the end of the bar – it seemed to be the only whole one left. The beer-taps had been opened and kept open, otherwise so much beer could not have escaped. Mark, faintly nauseated and more amazed, held his breath as he hurried across the room, crunching glass underfoot, and reached the clear air of the street. Rose Street, that morning, was a place of beauty compared with the interior of the inn.

A large excited crowd had gathered and half a dozen policemen kept the gangway clear. At the front of the crowd was the old man, still in shirt and trousers and worn boots, chattering to himself. Mark looked at him narrowly, decided that it was not the time to ask him questions, and stalked off. Loud hoots of derision followed him.

He did not go to the river but towards Mile End Road and, near Aldgate Station, he found a taxi. He went straight to Chelsea and when the cab drew up outside the Wests' house he saw Roger's face at the window. Roger disappeared and came hurrying along the path as Mark paid off his cabby.

Mark turned and then missed a step, he was so startled by the expression on Roger's face.

"What—?" he began.

"Have you seen Janet?" Roger demanded. He was pale, his eyes were hard and glittering.

"No," Mark said.

Roger drew a deep breath. "I hope she'd decided to come and give you a hand," he said. "She should have been here about twelve. It's half past one now and there's no sign of her."

“Have you done anything?” They reached the lounge and Mark sat on the arm of an easy chair as he spoke. Roger stood in front of the empty fireplace.

“I’ve told Pep and phoned Cornish,” he said. “Janet left Cornish at half past eleven and as far as he knew she was coming straight back here.” He ran his hand over his head and went on, heavily: “Mark, last night you suggested that they might be trying to get at Janet as well as me. What made you think so? Was it anything more than the fact that she was supposed to have made those payments?”

“No-o,” Mark said, slowly, “it was a passing idea, I don’t think I meant it seriously. Confound it, nothing could have happened to Janet!”

“Couldn’t it?” growled Roger.

Mark said: “No, and she’ll turn up – she’s probably had a brainwave and gone to try to solve the mystery herself!” He smiled reassuringly and stood up. “It’s not two hours yet, old man, you’re worrying yourself over nothing. Did Pep have anything else to say?”

Roger pursed his lips and stared at his friend, his eyes filled with shadows. The ticking of the mantelpiece clock seemed loud, the sound of people passing in the street was very noticeable. They did not speak for fully three minutes, then Roger moved, snapping his fingers, and said abruptly: “You’re right, I’m being a fool! What did you say?”

“Did Pep tell you anything?” Mark asked.

“No. I rang him up because Cornish had identified the taxi-driver for me and I’ve sent him to interview the fellow.” His tension appeared to relax as he smiled at Mark and added: “You’ve had a morning on the tiles, haven’t you?”

“Do I smell of beer?” asked Mark, startled.

“You look as if you’ve been swimming in it!” Roger declared, and then: “What about Leech? Did you—?”

Mark stood up and smoothed the back of his head, in turn looking so grim that Roger broke off short. He had to wait for what seemed a long time before the other, speaking quietly, told him what had happened to Joe. Only a deepening of the frown on Roger’s forehead betrayed emotion while Mark, well under way, elaborated the story and filled in the details. He excelled himself with a description of the damage done to the Saucy Sue and the character of Masher Malone.

When he finished, Roger said, slowly: “Malone impressed you, didn’t he?”

“He made me look over my shoulder all the way here from the pub,” Mark said, frankly. “I didn’t like the gentleman at all. Do you know him?”

“I’ve heard of him,” said Roger. “He has a gang but he’s never been caught. Race-course stuff and probably some black market – I didn’t know he was important.”

“If he isn’t he will be,” Mark said, forcing a smile. “I’ve never seen anyone so sure of himself. He might be swollen by his own conceit but he’s got guts and—oh, confound it, you know what I mean!”

“Ye-es,” said Roger. “I wish I knew more about him, but the Division

looks after the gangs, we don't touch them much at the Yard unless they go too far. It's Corny's old Division, he'll know what there is to know about Malone."

"Isn't to-day's affair 'too far'?" asked Mark.

Roger smiled, ruefully.

"I wouldn't know! Chatworth will probably have one of our men there because you put in an appearance, but as far as I can see it's a straightforward business except for one thing. He – I mean Malone – sent his gang on to wreck the pub. That's done often enough. He probably arranged for the murder to take place when he was in the room, so that the police couldn't touch him for that, although they might get him for disturbing the peace. He'd probably admit that the gang got out of hand and smashed up the place but"—Roger was frowning and rocking to and fro on his heels —"the very fact that he was behind the wrecking would suggest that he knew nothing of intent to murder."

"Why?" demanded Mark.

Roger said: "He, or his gang, had a grievance against Leech, probably because he's squealed and put one or two of them inside. The Masher's retort was to break Leech's place up – an eye for an eye. But if he intended murder, would he trouble to do the wrecking? Even to a man like the Masher, death is enough payment for betrayal. D'you follow me?"

"Ye-es," said Mark, slowly.

Roger smiled. "Only part of the way."

"No, farther than that," Mark said, more quickly. "The wrecking was a cover for the murder and Malone thought it would clear him, but—would the police accept that argument?"

"Not if they could prove anything else against Malone, but I think he's arranged it so that they can't. He'll probably even be able to 'prove' that he had nothing to do with the mob which broke in – I don't doubt they all got away. What did you actually see him do?"

"Unbolt the door—and he had some nerve!—and strike Leech," Mark said.

"With Leech threatening him with a gun? It's hardly a crime to strike someone who's threatening to shoot you," Roger said. "I'm beginning to rate Malone high, Mark; he's handled this well."

"Do you seriously think he'll get away with it?"

"I do," said Roger, briefly.

"Surely they'll hold him for questioning?"

"Oh, yes, but with a good lawyer he'll get off even if he is taken as far as the police court, but I doubt whether it will be allowed to go so far. There's no sense in bringing a case and putting Malone inside for a few days or weeks – which would be the absolute limit. More likely, the case would fail and he'd be able to cock a snook at us." He smiled at the 'us', the wound was still very raw. "If they arrest and charge him and he gets off, it would make it more difficult to get him on a similar or more serious charge, afterwards. Even the biggest rogue can claim that he's being persecuted and

get a lot of public and judiciary sympathy." He laughed. "Don't become a policeman, Mark!"

After a pause, Mark asked quietly: "You said it was straightforward with one exception, didn't you?"

"Yes!" Roger was crisp. "Why did it coincide with your arrival? Pub wrecking is a pastime that's indulged in often enough, but usually it's done after dark, when the pub is open. In the confusion the gang can escape and the police get tangled up with the innocent customers who've joined in for the fun of the thing. A morning bust is rare. I think—" he paused.

"It surely can't have had anything to do with me," said Mark, uncertainly.

"I think it almost certainly had," said Roger, smiling a little obscurely. "You probably saw no one *en route* to the pub, but a hundred people saw you go in. If Malone wanted to make sure Leech didn't squeal about him he'd have lookers-out everywhere and he'd learn within five minutes that you'd arrived. You say there was a whistle and Leech knew immediately that it was a sign of Malone?"

"Yes."

"The gang was approaching and someone had seen Malone and gave the signal to start," said Roger; "that gave Malone time to deal with you and Leech. The main question is whether he knew you, as yourself, were there, or whether he just wanted to make sure that Leech did not confide in any stranger."

"How the dickens could he have known of me?"

Roger looked at him oddly.

"Mind not working well this morning?" he asked. "If Malone was connected with the *canard* about me he would know that you've often lent me a hand."

Mark stared. "I can't believe—"

The telephone interrupted them and Roger, proving that Janet was still in the forefront of his mind, stepped swiftly forward and lifted the receiver. "There is a call for you," said the operator. "Hold on, please." Roger heard her speaking to the caller. "Press button A, please – you're through."

"Roger!" cried Janet.

"Oh, thank God!" said Roger, sitting down heavily on the arm of a chair. Mark saw perspiration on his forehead and an inane grin on his lips. "Jan, where—?"

"I've had the very devil of a time!" Janet said, hurriedly. "I've never been so scared, darling! I'm at Chertsey now—"

"Chertsey?"

"Yes. I left Cornish and thought I would walk across St. James's and get a bus from Victoria Street. I was in the park when two men came alongside me." She spoke breathlessly, obviously still feeling the effect of her experience. Roger's smile faded and his lips set in a grim line. "They told me to obey orders if I wanted to be unhurt – Roger, it was fantastic! There were hundreds of people about and there was I walking between them, not daring to raise my voice. They hired a taxi, I don't think the driver was in the

know, and made me get in. I didn't hear where they told him to go but they climbed in after me and —Roger, they just didn't speak! It was crazy, but they just didn't speak, and whenever I started to, they snapped at me to be quiet."

"Yes," said Roger, tautly.

"It seemed an unending journey," Janet said. "I felt sure that I was being kidnapped. Once I thought I might jump out, at a traffic jam, but one of them gripped my arm and I couldn't do a thing. We reached Hounslow and they made me get out, took me to another taxi and—brought me here."

"And then?" Roger asked.

"Nothing!" exclaimed Janet.

"Nothing at all?" demanded Roger, incredulously.

"Absolutely nothing," Janet assured him. "They stopped the taxi outside one of the houses by the river – the phone number of the kiosk is Chertsey 123 but it's not far from Staines – and told me to get out. Then they just drove off! I walked along the river and came to this kiosk – Roger, it *is* crazy, isn't it?"

"Ye-es," said Roger, "another touch of fantasy." He guessed that Mark was on edge to hear the story but his own initial relief had been offset by another sobering emotion. "But all's well, my sweet! Get to Staines and come to Waterloo, I'll meet you there. Just a moment, I'll find the times of trains." He turned to a writing cabinet but Mark was already at it, taking out a timetable. He turned the pages and gave the times of the trains and Roger repeated them.

"I'll catch the three something," Janet said. "I haven't had any lunch and I'm starved. Don't trouble to meet me, I'll be all right."

"Get a snack at the station buffet and catch the two something," Roger said firmly. "I won't be happy until I set eyes on you . . . yes, I do mean it! . . . oh, we'll have a snack here. Mark has had an alarming morning, too . . . yes, I will . . . good-bye for now."

He replaced the receiver and turned to look into Mark's eager eyes.

"I don't like it one little bit," he said, and gave Mark a *resumé* of what Janet had told him, although there was an easier note in his voice as he finished. "Warning number 1, or 2, or 3, choose which you like!"

"Warning?" ejaculated Mark.

"Yes. They've demonstrated that they can, if they wish, make Janet do a disappearing trick," Roger said; "it can't mean anything else. At least we know that they mean business!" He smiled more freely and led the way to the kitchen. "We'd better get a snack."

It was a quarter to two and Janet's train was not due to arrive at Waterloo until after three. Nothing happened meanwhile and Roger set out for Waterloo. He reached the station ten minutes before the train arrived and he could hardly wait, although he tried to assure himself that if a warning had been given, he would probably be given time to heed it. Then the train came in and Janet was not among the first passengers to alight. Tight-lipped, he peered along the platform, trying to distinguish her tall

figure, and he was about to push through the barrier when he caught sight of her, hurrying and smiling in anticipation, quite outstanding amongst the motley crowd.

She gave up her ticket, they gripped hands and Roger pulled her towards him and kissed her. Janet said breathlessly that she'd never known a journey take so long.

"You *are* all right?" Roger demanded.

"Bruised only in spirit," Janet said, and laughed with relief. "What on earth did they do it for, darling? To show what they *can* do if they make up their minds?"

Roger grinned. "You're not slow, are you?"

"You think that's it?"

"I feel sure it is," Roger said, "but we aren't going to let it worry us now and I'm going to keep you on a piece of string until this is over!" He looked at her and saw that her eyes were filled with tears. "Oh, my sweet—" he began.

"No, don't fuss me!" Janet said, sharply for her. He walked quietly by her side, reflecting that the experience had affected her more than he had expected. Soon, she tucked her arm into his.

"Sorry," she said. "I feel so jumpy."

"Who wouldn't?" Roger asked, reassured.

They went by Underground to Knightsbridge and walked from there to the bus stop, catching a bus which dropped them at the end of Bell Street. They said little, except that Janet did her best to describe the two men who had forced her into the taxi. Neither of them had been out of the ordinary, and although she thought she would recognise them again any time, Roger knew that it would be impossible to pick them up on a description which could apply equally well to a hundred men. Yet he was too relieved by her return to worry much about it – and, as they turned into Bell Street and saw a taxi waiting outside the house, his thoughts were diverted. He gripped Janet's arm and hustled her along.

"Who do you think has called?" demanded Janet.

"A cabby with a good memory, I hope," said Roger. "Ah, there's Pep! It's my man of last night all right."

Chapter 9

AN ADDRESS IN WELBECK STREET

The cabby was a gruff individual, as Roger remembered from their brief encounter in the black-out. He was also a stolid, solid fellow, who wore a dirty collar and tie but only one overcoat; he was standing with Pep Morgan and Mark in the lounge and glared at Roger as he entered with Janet, but he managed to smile when he saw Janet, and touched his forehead. He even removed his cap, which had been at the back of his head.

"Nar p'raps you can tell me wot it's all erbaht?" he said, eyeing Roger aggressively. "I dunno wot you think I am. Got to be earning me living, I 'ave, not like some people." He sniffed; his nose was red and he spoke thickly, obviously wrestling with an incipient cold. "Wot's it all erbaht, Mister?"

"Do you remember taking me to Scotland Yard last night?" Roger asked, taking out his wallet and extracting two pound notes. The cabby stared at them, sniffed again, then answered in a more conciliatory tone.

"That's right, Guv'nor, I remember it clearly."

"And you let another man share the cab?"

"Nar listen, I don't 'ave to tell yer what you already know, Guv'nor, do I, even if you are a dick?"

"I'm talking as a private citizen," Roger said; at all costs he must not let it be put around that he was making capital of his Yard position. "How far did the other man go?"

"West End," said the cabby, "not so far."

"Do you remember where you dropped him?"

"Yerse – end o' Welbeck Street."

"Which end?" asked Roger.

"Piccadilly," said the cabby.

"He didn't say where he was going?"

"No," said the cabby, "he just said the end o' Welbeck Street would be all right for 'im, that's all. Only 'e went dahn the street, I know that, 'cos I saw him disappear into a 'ouse. I wanted to lay orf for an hour so I follered 'im along to the nearest rank. Yerse, I see him going into one o' the houses, mister, I can tell you that."

Roger felt hopeful.

"Was it far along?"

"I don't e'sackly know," said the other, frowning, "but it wasn't *so* far, Guv'nor, although I couldn't say for certain which one it was. Tell yer what," he added, his eyes on the two pounds, "there was a n'island in the middle of the road just erbaht where he turned into the 'ouse. I know that place like the palm o' me 'and. It might 'ave been the second island or the first but it was a n'island. That suit, Guv'nor?"

"It's a great help," said Roger, warmly. "Are you busy?"

"I ain't got much petrol," the man said, defensively.

"I don't want to go far," said Roger. "Pep, will you come with me?"

"Why, of course," said Morgan.

"But—" began Janet.

"Mark will look after the house," said Roger, very cheerfully, "and he'll keep an eye on you. I won't be long!" He seemed to be in high fettle as he stepped into the hall to get his hat, and ignored Janet's protests and Mark's questioning gaze. He was followed by the cabby and Pep, whose shoes twinkled and whose face shone although his forehead was wrinkled in perplexity. Roger waved to Janet and Mark, who were standing on the porch, as the cab moved off, and he lit a cigarette after Morgan had refused one.

"*Now* what's got into you, Handsome?" demanded Morgan, resignedly. "That's the trouble with you, I never know whether I'm coming or going."

"Oh, we're going," said Roger, expansively, "and I'm full of ideas. How did you get on at the Yard last night?"

"I didn't like it much, Handsome," Morgan said frankly. "I never did like that slab-faced Abbott, and after the way he talked to me last night I won't ever have a good word to say for him. Sarcastic swine, that's what he is. But I didn't give anything away and you put me all right your end, Mr. Lessing says."

"Yes, they know you're working for me," Roger said.

In King's Road the cabby opened the glass partition and asked sarcastically if the gentleman would mind telling him where to go. He contrived to look over his shoulder without turning his body, gazing pointedly at Roger's hand. Roger glanced down and found himself still clutching the two pound notes. He laughed.

"Welbeck Street, didn't I tell you? Oh, and thanks!" He pushed the notes through the partition, the cabby took them and grunted his thanks, then closed the window. Roger sat back and smiled at Pep. "Have you heard what happened to Mark this morning?"

"Just a bit," said Morgan. "The driver was with us most of the time; he couldn't say much. What *did* happen?"

Roger told him but did not add why he had suddenly become animated and left the house in such a hurry, until they reached the end of Welbeck Street. The cabby explained at some length where he thought the passenger had gone. It was into one of the houses near the second island in the middle of the street.

"Thanks," Roger said, "if you care to wait, I'll probably want to go back to Chelsea soon."

"I doan mind waiting," said the cabby, gruffly.

"Would you mind telling me what you think you can do at a house where this customer *might* have come?" demanded Morgan, aggrievedly. "I can't help you if I'm in the dark all the time. Handsome, can I?"

"Pep," said Roger, in high good humour, "you missed a vision this

morning. A Daimler pulled up outside my house and out she stepped."

"Who did?"

"The vision!"

"Now be sensible," protested Morgan.

"Oh, I am being! She was beauty itself and there was money oozing from her. She came, she said, to solicit Janet's help for the Society of European Relief, and she was very winsome about it. Also," he added, offhandedly, "the offices of the Society are in Welbeck Street."

Morgan looked at him sharply.

"So I wouldn't be surprised if we don't find many interesting things here," said Roger, cheerfully. "We've plenty to go on, Pep, almost too much in some ways, although with you and Mark to help we'll get through. How do you like working for an ex- policeman?"

"Now don't talk like that," remonstrated Morgan. "What are you going to do?"

"You take the next house, I'll take the one beyond it," Roger said. "See if you can find the name of the Society of European Relief on one of the boards." He smiled as Pep went up four steps leading to an open door and whistled to himself as he viewed the next-door house. It had been taken over as offices but none of the name-boards mentioned the Society. To refresh his memory, he looked at Mrs. Sylvester Cartier's card: Welbeck Street was right but there was no number. Pep passed him, shaking his head. They were opposite the island and the cabby had pulled up on the other side of the road.

The next house was a blank also, but when Roger walked down the steps he saw Morgan standing on the porch next door, waving to him and smiling excitedly. Roger joined him quickly.

"Got it!" exclaimed Morgan. "You'll make quite a detective when you grow up, Handsome!" He led the way into a darkened hall-way and pointed to the notice board, which had the names of four different firms or institutions; on the third floor – the top – was the Society of European Relief. "But there's no lift," Morgan said.

"I couldn't ask you to walk up all those stairs," Roger said. "Stay down here and keep your eyes open, Pep, will you?"

"Now, listen—"

"You can't have all the jam," Roger told him. He made for the stairs, going up the first two flights two at a time but then proceeding more calmly. Pep shook a fist at him but did not attempt to follow.

The landings were darkened but windows were open and allowed some light in. From the offices on the second floor came a clatter of typewriters and from one room the strains of a radio; it sounded like the B.B.C. Orchestra. Roger went, still sedately, to the next floor. A typewriter was clattering and one door was ajar. It was marked 'Enquiries' and had the name of the society underneath. Roger stepped in. Behind a wooden partition he could hear a typewriter going at high speed and reflected that the Society had at least one expert typist. He pressed a bell in the counter

and started at the loud, harsh ring. The typewriter stopped at the first sound, a chair was pushed back and a girl rounded the partition.

She was pretty; she wore a white blouse and a dark skirt; her hair was dark, like Janet's, and she was about Janet's height. She appeared very self-possessed and smiled pleasantly. On her right hand was a solitaire diamond ring, large enough to be noticeable.

"Good afternoon, sir. Can I help you?" Roger liked her voice.

"I think you probably can," he said.

He admitted only an outside possibility that this was the girl who had visited the bank as Janet. He was prepared to find that, perhaps in some obscure way, the Society was connected with the major mystery, and the fact that someone had been taken for Janet was well to the forefront of his mind. When he saw the girl he wondered how soon he could arrange for the cashier at the Mid-Union Bank to see her, for at first sight there was a passing resemblance.

Yet it was not easy to imagine that she had played a part in so tortuous a plot; there was an openness about her face which he found refreshing – she had something of Janet's direct, attractive manner.

As he considered her she stared at him with growing bewilderment and before he spoke she asked with a touch of impatience: "What is it you want, please?"

Roger smiled charmingly. "I wonder if you would take £250 in notes to the Mid-Union Bank and put it into my account? My name is West."

He knew at once that he had scored a hit; it made him feel light-headed. She backed away, her eyes narrowed, and he thought she groped behind her as if for help. As he gave his name, her lips – red but not heavily made up – parted slightly and her breathing grew agitated.

"What—what are you talking about?" she said, thinly.

"Don't tell me that I have to say it again," said Roger. After all, you've done it often enough to know how easy it is, haven't you?"

"You're talking nonsense!"

"Am I?" asked Roger. "I wonder how long you'll continue to think so? But look here, I'm not an ogre—"

"If you have any business to discuss, please state what it is," said the girl, stiffly. She stood a foot away from the counter with her hands clenched by her sides; the ring glittered like fire. She was badly frightened, but she tried hard not to show it and her voice was steady. "I haven't time to waste."

"You know," said Roger, "the cashier will be able to identify you."

"I have no idea what you mean," she said. "Please go away."

"What, so soon?" asked Roger. "I've only just—"

A door, behind the partition, began to open; he could see the top of it. Someone moved towards the reception office and a middle-aged man appeared, his kind face looking faintly puzzled. He had grey hair and a gentle voice.

"Lois, my dear," he said, "I thought you were going to—oh!" He broke off at sight of Roger. "I beg your pardon, I did not know you were engaged. Can

we help you, sir?"

He wore thick-lensed glasses which hid his eyes but did not conceal his involuntary start when he saw Roger and obviously recognised him. He hid his feelings better than the girl. He had come out because he had heard part of the conversation, that was certain; he had probably heard the buzzer and been determined not to let the girl face an interrogation on her own.

He smiled gently and blandly and peered short-sightedly into Roger's eyes.

Roger beamed widely. "Can I give you a lift?" he asked "I'm going as far as Scotland Yard."

"I *beg* your pardon!"

"Do you know, I think you are both being wilfully obtuse," Roger said, wonderingly, "but you'll have to change your attitude."

The man drew himself up to his full height, which was no more than medium; his sloping shoulders did nothing to make him impressive, nor did his well-worn suit of drab grey.

"I dislike your threatening manner, sir!"

"No threats," Roger said, "just a little jogging of your memory. Last night —"

"I was at home *all* last night," declared the man sharply, giving sufficient emphasis to the 'all' to make it clear that, although he knew what Roger meant, he was confident of his alibi. "Lois, has this person been threatening you?"

The girl said, hesitatingly: "He—he seems to think he knows me."

"Do you know him?"

"No, I—"

"You will both know me in future," Roger said, "and I'll know you, so it cuts both ways." He smiled widely, stood for a moment surveying them, and then turned and left the little office. The door, which was fitted with a vacuum-type doorstep, closed behind him with a gentle hiss.

He was no longer smiling. He had bungled a golden opportunity, and allowed himself to be carried away by a bright idea, in a way which would have disgraced a raw sergeant. He should have made a tentative inquiry and then engineered an opportunity for the bank cashier to see the girl; now, he had warned them of their danger, had virtually invited them to get away.

He made another mistake, too; he should have brought Morgan up with him, the little man should now be waiting outside the door, ready to slip inside and listen in to the conversation in the inner office. He reached the head of the stairs, then stopped – for Morgan was smiling at him from half-way up the stairs!

"You were away so long—" the private detective began,"I thought—"

"Hush!" warned Roger, and beckoned him. Morgan drew level and Roger went on: "Try to get inside the office, the first on the right, and hear what's being said next door, Pep. They won't hear you go in if you're careful."

"Okay," said Morgan, hurrying past him.

Rather easier in his mind, Roger went to the first landing and stood by

the banisters, lighting a cigarette. He was really angry with himself. He had been wrong to come here, Mark should have handled this part of the inquiry. He admitted ruefully that from the moment when the idea of the Welbeck Street association had first entered his head he had been carried away by it and, on finding that he had scored a hit, had let himself act rashly.

He heard someone coming up the stairs.

He thought at once of Mrs. Sylvester Cartier and, looking round hastily, saw a door, marked 'Enquiries,' of another suite; he slipped inside. Keeping the door open an inch or two, he looked out, but as the newcomer drew nearer he felt sure that he had been wrong. Mrs. Cartier would walk with a brisk step and her heels would tap sharply on the bare wooden boards. This walker came slowly.

It was a man, whose careworn face was lined with the marks of great suffering. His sad eyes and the dejected droop of his shoulders startled Roger. He watched the man walking wearily towards the next flight of stairs and then realised that the newcomer would almost certainly discover Pep at his spying.

An exclamation behind him told him that he had been seen and he stepped swiftly out of the office, closing the door. He hurried after the haggard man who, he had no doubt, was an alien coming to appeal for assistance from the Society.

"Excuse me, sir." He kept his voice low, making the other turn in surprise on the landing. He jumped, too – Roger had seen refugees from Europe who started violently at the most trivial surprise.

"Y-yes, sir?" The man's accent was strong.

"I thought I would save you wasting a journey," Roger said; "there is no one upstairs – I have just been trying to get in myself."

Sad, disappointed eyes regarded him, making him ashamed of the lie.

"T'ank you, sir, t'ank you so mooch." The man ran his fingers through his sparse hair. "I vill vait, I t'ink, I 'ave come for an app—appointment." He looked along the bare passage and, at the far end, Roger saw some camp-beds, for the fire-watchers. "I weel sit down, please."

"Oh, by all means!" said Roger, "and I'll wait with you."

The beds were at the far end of the passage, away from the doors; a stirrup-pump and fire-guard helmets were also in the corner. He thought he heard a mutter of conversation but could not be sure. The old fellow shuffled along beside him, clearly dejected. Roger offered him a cigarette but he refused it, saying that he had not smoked for a long time. He sat on the edge of one of the beds, staring blankly at the wall. Some great unimaginable tragedy weighed heavily upon him – he had the resigned look of a man who knows that nothing good can come to him, that he will, at best, have to make a choice between two evils.

Roger received no encouragement when he tried to start a conversation. A quarter of an hour passed, and he began to wonder whether anything had happened to Pep. He grew alarmed and excused himself and moved towards

the doors. One opened and Pep came out on tip-toe. He hurried along the passage but faltered when he saw Roger, who shook his head. Pep took his meaning and hurried down the stairs.

"Well, that's surprising!" exclaimed Roger. "No one answered when I knocked."

"It ees—your turn," the old man said, in a tone of infinite patience.

"I'm in no hurry," said Roger, "you go along."

"You—you weel not mind?" The man was startled but when Roger reassured him he walked more briskly towards the end of the passage and disappeared into the office. Once he had gone,

Roger hurried in Morgan's wake. The private detective was standing on the pavement, near the taxi, and the cabby was speaking bitterly to him of the lack of consideration displayed by some people. He stood to attention when Roger arrived and asked sarcastically: "Any more waiting, sir?"

"No," said Roger, briefly; "back to Bell Street." He looked at Morgan. "Unless—"

"Bell Street's all right for me," said Morgan, and when they were sitting together in the cab he shot a sideways glance at Roger, full of meaning, and breathed: "Handsome, have we found something!"

Roger said: "What?"

"That was the girl who paid in the cash and you've scared the wits out of her," said Morgan. "The old man did most of the talking, but I couldn't hear all of it. He tried to pacify her at first but didn't have much luck. But"—Morgan's little eyes were rounded with concern—"he put the fear of death into her then, Handsome!"

"Well, well!" said Roger, softly.

"When she kept on saying that she couldn't do any more, he changed his tune, told her she knew what he could do to her if she didn't behave herself and ordered her to go back to her work. I came out then, I didn't think she'd be long after me."

"No-o," said Roger. "Pep, we ought to have waited. I can't do anything right. We'll have to follow her."

Morgan grinned. "I've got her address! Her handbag was on her desk, so I had a look inside it. I think I've got his private address, too – she called him Pickerell; you couldn't mistake a name like that, could you? I found a 'Pickerell' in an address book on her desk and made a note of it. Her name's Randall."

Sitting back at ease and copying the addresses in his notebook, Roger said: "You're teaching me my job, Pep!"

"Yes, perhaps!" said Morgan, heavily. "Handsome, what have we struck? I didn't catch a glimpse of the girl but I don't mind telling you I felt sorry for her, she sounded kind of helpless."

"I know what you mean," Roger said.

"Well, as we know who paid the money in – it lets you out," said Morgan, "but *they* know you know and that makes it awkward, doesn't it? Then, why did that vision you talked about tell you to go there? I know she didn't

actually tell you, but she went pretty near it, didn't she?"

"She did," admitted Roger, frowning. "And—Pep, we're crazy!" He leaned forward and rapped on the glass partition, opening it as the cabby automatically applied his brakes. "Get back to Welbeck Street!" Roger snapped, startling the man so much that he was unable to find a comment.

"What—" began Morgan.

"The girl can give evidence," Roger said, "and she's close to breaking-point; Pickerell knows it. I wouldn't like to be responsible for what will happen to her if we leave her with him for long."

"By cripes!" gasped Morgan. "You think—"

"He knows that if I bring Yard men along and question her persistently enough the place will be closed down, the whole racket might be broken open," Roger said. "He'll see that she's the weak link, and—" he broke off, not needing to explain further, and sat on the edge of the seat, tight-lipped, furious with himself.

The cabby obeyed orders with a vengeance; they reached Welbeck Street in a few minutes; he pulled up with a jerk outside the house where the Society had its office, and looked round with an expression which said: 'Does *that* satisfy you?' but Roger was already getting out. He ran up the steps and disappeared up the stairs. As he neared the top landing he heard voices, including that of the girl. Breathing hard, he turned the corner and saw the old fellow who had gone in ahead of him. There was a brighter expression on the careworn face and he smiled at Roger, not widely but with some gaiety.

The door was closing.

Roger opened it and made so much noise that the girl, who could hardly have sat down after seeing the old man off, came round the partition.

Her face dropped. He could see the signs of strain in her eyes and knew that Morgan had been right, that she was afraid. Yet something in Roger's expression seemed to affect her and she did not cry out.

Roger spoke quietly: "Don't take risks, Miss Randall; get out while the going's good."

She gulped, then said: "I—I don't understand you."

Roger said: "You do, you're as frightened as you can be. I heard the conversation and—"

"*Did* you?" asked the man named Pickerell. He was at the partition, his face still looked gentle and his eyes were half hidden by his glasses, but nothing hid the automatic in his right hand. "You are very impetuous, Mr. West, aren't you? I think it's time that we reached an understanding. Go into my office, Lois. Mr. West, don't do anything foolish, I am quite capable of shooting you. Just follow Miss Randall."

Chapter 10

THE MISTAKE OF MR. PICKERELL

Disobeying a desperate man with a gun was not Roger's conception of good sense. He obeyed, without looking behind him, but hoping that Pep had followed closely enough to have overheard the last remark. If he had, the private detective had made no sound.

The inner office was large and barely furnished, with a threadbare carpet – which Roger noticed because the girl caught her foot in some loose threads and nearly fell. The windows were covered with wire-netting, the distemper on the walls was flaking and some of the ceiling plaster had fallen down. By one window, in a corner, was a huge desk littered with papers, many of them clipped together. It had the appearance of a room where much work was done.

"Stand over by the window, Mr. West," said Pickerell.

'' I hope you realise that you're committing a criminal offence,'' Roger said, sharply.

The man smiled. "Am I? Perhaps not the first, and I know how far I can go." The thought seemed to amuse him, for his full lips curved. "And you are no longer a policeman with authority, Mr. West; I have heard of your discomfiture."

"Oh," said Roger, and softly: "You learned very quickly, didn't you?"

"It doesn't do to lose time," said Pickerell. "We won't waste any now, either. Let me sum up the situation. You think that by exerting enough pressure you can get Miss Randall to clear you of suspicions of paying money into your account at the Mid-Union Bank. You think that by so doing you can regain your position at Scotland Yard and use the forces of law and order to attack *me.* Think again, Mr. West!"

Roger said nothing; the girl stood by the desk, her troubled eyes narrowed and looking at Roger intently. She drummed the fingers of her right hand on the corner, making the diamond ring scintillate.

"Think again," repeated Pickerell, softly. "Miss Randall was the actual messenger, yes, but someone gave her the money. She might be persuaded to say that it was you – in fact I think I can rely on her to do that. Can't I, Lois?"

The girl said nothing.

"Can't I?" insisted Pickerell, sternly. "After all, my dear, you have so much at stake. Nothing will happen to you, although West obviously thinks that you are in some danger. You would be, if you could go free and say what you liked, but I know you will obey instructions now, as you have in the past. *Won't* you?" His voice grew silky.

"I—" began the girl, and then turned away, exclaiming:

"Damn you, yes!"

Pickerell smiled. “You see, West? If you tell your friends what you have discovered, or pretend to do any such thing, when Lois is questioned she will tell them exactly what they want to know. You will be charged then – I hardly know how you have succeeded in remaining free for so long – but if you want to retain that freedom, be discreet about this little conversation. Do you understand?”

Roger leaned back against the wall, not speaking.

“I see that you do,” said Pickerell. “Now, West, there is another question and I insist on an answer. If you refuse one I shall arrange for Miss Randall to tell her story whatever you do. You are in a most unfortunate position, aren’t you? Now – how did you come to find this address?”

Roger said: “You were traced here.”

“Yes, yes, but how?”

“Your foolish habit of slipping messages into coat pockets betrayed you,” said Roger. “The taxi-driver was traced and all the offices here and in the adjoining buildings were searched. Your voice is unmistakable.”

“Now don’t lie to me,” said Pickerell; “you didn’t hear my voice until after you had identified Lois.”

“I tried that gambit with all girls on the premises who might have passed for my wife,” Roger said, plausibly. “Pickerell, there is a powerful organisation at the Yard and you won’t get away with this. Your gun won’t help you, if you use it you will simply make the position worse for yourself.”

“Perhaps,” said Pickerell, “but you are not a fool, West, you will not take the risk of Lois committing perjury since you will suffer so much in consequence. Are you sure that is the way you discovered this office?”

“Yes,” lied Roger, shortly.

“I see.” The man seemed relieved. “Now, will you be sensible and go away? I suggest a long holiday in the country. You need not be too conscientious and—” he paused before going on as if delighted with a new idea, “and I think I can assure you that when I have finished my work you will have nothing to worry about. You need not be afraid, the truth can be told afterwards and you will be back at your desk without a stain on your character. Take the wise course, I beg you.”

Roger said: “You’ve made one mistake, Pickerell.”

“Bluff will not—”

“It’s nothing to do with bluff,” said Roger. “You’ve assumed that I heard your conversation with Miss Randall. I didn’t, but someone else did. My evidence might not carry but the evidence of two people will and when Miss Randall realises that her evidence will be rebutted she’ll see that the only way out is to tell the truth.”

The man’s face was expressionless.

“You are lying, West.”

“Please yourself,” said Roger, shrugging, and raised his voice. “Pep, are you there? Be careful, he’s armed.”

“I’ve rung the Yard, Handsome,” came Pep’s voice, “they won’t be long.”

The girl gasped. Pickerell looked towards the door and tightened his lips

– Roger stepped hastily to one side, thinking he was going to shoot.

Pickerell thought better of it. He backed to his desk and, keeping the gun trained on Roger, the girl and the door – all in line with one another – pulled open a drawer and took out some papers. He felt inside the drawer as if to make sure that it was empty, then stuffed the papers into his pocket.

That done, he took out a box of matches.

Roger guessed what he intended to do but the threat of the gun kept him still. Clumsily, with one hand, Pickerell broke two matches before one ignited. He held it to the corner of a paper on the desk and, when that was burning, to others. Smoke and flames rose up and began to spread.

"You fool!" Roger cried. You'll—"

"Stay where you are!" snapped Pickerell. He moved towards a door leading to the passage as the flames took a firmer hold. The smell of burning grew strong. A ring of flames ran along the cable of the telephone and a draught from the open window sent two pieces of burning paper sliding along the desk, where they caught others; the desk and its contents were soon ablaze and the smoke was beginning to make Roger cough. The girl turned towards the window but Pickerell did not pay her any attention. Step by step, he reached the passage door, took a key from his pocket, inserted and turned it.

"Pep!" Roger exclaimed, moving forward, "he's—"

Pickerell stretched out a leg and kicked a chair, standing near the wall, in Roger's path. Then he pulled the door open and stepped swiftly into the passage. Morgan's voice was raised and Pickerell fired; the gun was not silenced and the shot echoed about the passage, followed by a sharp exclamation from Morgan. Roger jumped over the chair and reached the passage in time to see Pep leaning against the wall, with one leg off the ground, and Pickerell disappearing down the stairs. He ran past Pep and would have had a chance of reaching the man but for the opening of the 'Enquiries' door and the sudden appearance of Lois Randall. She got in his way, blocking his path by accident or design. He pushed past her, roughly, and sped on, calling: "Put that fire out!"

He knew that the opportunity was lost. He could not see the other man and, when he reached the street, there was no sign of him. The stocky cabby was lounging against his taxi, wide-eyed and staring towards the Piccadilly end of the street.

"Some people!" he was saying. "Swore at me just because I said—"

"Did he get a cab?" Roger snapped.

"Yerse, 'arf way up the road, Guv'nor."

"You didn't hear where he directed the driver?"

"Nar what do you think I am?" demanded the cabby, with a vast, triumphant grin, "a radio-location expert?"

Roger said: "One day you'll learn when to be funny. Telephone Scotland Yard from the nearest call-box, ask for Inspector Cornish and tell him that West—have you got that, West?"

"Yerse," said the cabby, visibly impressed.

"... says that he should send men to this address quickly," Roger said. He turned and hurried upstairs, wondering whether he was too late to stop the fire from spreading. He had been forced to attempt too many things at once. There was no sign of the girl but Pep Morgan was disappearing into the end office, from which smoke was billowing in great choking gusts. Roger hurried after him, to find him wincing as he dragged himself towards the desk, the top of which was all ablaze. He picked up a heavy ledger with one hand and began to beat at the desk.

"All right, Pep," said Roger, "I'll get the stirrup pump."

He was surprised to see no one else on that floor and, as he reached the beds and the fire-fighting apparatus, he called out for help. Someone had smelt the fire and was on the landing below; he hurried up. He was a middle-aged man, followed by two girls and an old lady; all of them sized up the situation quickly and took their places, obviously thoroughly trained in fire-fighting. A cloak-room, near the outer office of the Society, was handy for water and within five minutes the stirrup-pump was hissing and spraying the desk, while the two girls were going round the office, beating out little fires started by the burning paper which had blown off the desk.

Pep was sitting on a chair against the wall, perspiring freely and with his right leg stuck out in front of him. Roger turned to help him but Pep shook his head and pointed to the other door. Roger nodded and went into the room where Lois had been working. He ran through the papers on her desk, picking up an address book and a telephone index. He pushed them into his coat but made reasonably sure there was nothing else there of interest until, opening a small account book, he saw that the pages were headed with copper-plate handwriting, admirably executed in black drawing ink. The entries were not all the same, some being in a neat hand which he imagined to be the girl's, but others, in drawing ink, had exactly the same characteristics as the letter from *K'.

"So I don't need to look much farther for him," he said, then laughed shortly. "Don't I? I wonder if—"

He looked through the address book, found the name 'Pickerell' and an address in Lambeth. He picked up the telephone and dialled the Yard, asking for Chatworth. He was told that the A.C. was not in. He knew that Eddie Day would shrink from taking any action without Chatworth's express wishes; Cornish was the only man on whom he might be able to rely for assistance. He made sure that Cornish had left, then, accepting the inevitable, he asked for Abbott.

The Superintendent's voice sounded frigid.

"What is it, West?"

"I have the name and address of a man named Pickerell," Roger said, knowing that whatever else Abbott did he would take the message correctly. "He has admitted arranging for the payment of the money into my account. Pickerell has just left his office and might have gone to his home, at 81 Bligh Street, Lambeth. That's all."

He rang down, giving Abbott no chance to ask irritating questions and

hoping that he had forced an issue. Then he heard men approaching and was relieved to see Cornish passing the open door. He called out and Cornish hurried towards him.

"Much excitement," smiled Roger, "but I'm afraid the bird's flown, Corny."

"Flown?" Cornish's voice rose in disappointment.

"I've just phoned Abbott and told him where he might be, so you'd better stay here," Roger said. "Abbott will probably resent it if you usurp his authority."

"I don't give a snap of the fingers for Abbott!" said Cornish roundly. "Do you think—"

Roger persuaded him, without too much trouble, to stay at the office of the Society. The fire, and Roger's and Morgan's evidence, were enough to justify Cornish making a search, although Roger kept the address book and telephone list tucked under his coat. Eventually, Roger found that the two girls of the fire-fighting party had given Pep Morgan first aid; a bullet had entered the fleshy part of his thigh. They had unceremoniously removed his trousers and, judging from the bright hue of his face, greatly embarrassed him. The wound was bandaged well, however, and when an ambulance arrived with a doctor in attendance the latter declared the work excellent and said it would keep Pep going until he reached hospital.

Roger saw the little private detective off.

"Got everything you want, Handsome?" Morgan whispered hoarsely as he was being lifted on a stretcher into the ambulance.

"Everything," Roger assured him, "and I'll look in before the day's out, Pep."

"Don't you worry about me, you look after yourself," said Morgan. "Oh, there is *one* thing, Handsome – if you wouldn't mind telling my wife. Don't want some idiot putting the wind up her, it's nothing much."

"I'll go straight from here," Roger promised.

Pep said 'Ta!' fervently and then the doors were closed on him.

Roger felt a strange independence in his freedom from the obligation to go immediately to the Yard and report – and he was appreciative of Cornish's 'forgetfulness' in not telling him to stay long enough to make a full statement.

He found the cabby waiting nearby. The truculence of the man remained, although he appeared to regard Roger with more respect.

"Anywhere else, Guv'nor?" he asked, and then added carelessly: "Your pal copped it, didn't he?"

Roger smiled. "Oh, that was nothing to what will probably happen."

"Wot, see-riously?" Truculence was lost in amazement.

"Yes," said Roger. "Shall I hire another cab?"

"Don't you leave me aht o' this," snapped the cabby with quick resentment. "I drove all through the blitz, didn't I? What's a little thing like this to the blitz? Where to?"

Roger said: "Clapham Common, I'll—"

Then he broke off. Looking along the street, he saw a Daimler limousine turn the corner and approach slowly. He did not know whether Mrs. Sylvester Cartier was inside but recognised her chauffeur, the man with the economical name of ‘Bott’.

Chapter 11

THE STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

AS Roger stepped away from him, showing no desire to get into the taxi, the cabby drew himself up to his full height, which was not exceptional, puffed out his chest and thrust forward his square, unshaven chin, narrowed his shrewd eyes and spoke with deep feeling.

"Guv'nor, *will* yer make up your mind? Are you a fare or aren't you? Do you want to go to Clapham Common or—"

Roger looked over his shoulder and frowned, then returned to the man as the Daimler began to slow down. He took a handful of silver from his pocket, thrust it into the cabby's hand – which was promptly held forward – and spoke quietly.

"Give me some change, make it look as if I'm paying you off." He waited only for the man's startled expression to change to one of understanding before going on "Drive along the street and wait where you can follow the Daimler when it moves off. Wait as long as necessary with your flag down, and when you've finished following it, telephone my Chelsea house. The number is Chelsea 0123. Keep the chase up all night if necessary."

"What erbaht petrol?" the cabby demanded, putting a threepenny piece and some coppers into Roger's hand. "There's yer change, Guv'nor!"

"Do the best you can," said Roger. He looked at the trifling change, saw the man's grin and smiled in spite of himself. "I'm relying on you," he added, "and I'll make it worth your while."

He turned and approached the house again.

The Daimler had drawn up and chauffeur Bott was standing, stiff as a ramrod, by the door. A man stepped out, tall, elegant and impressive-looking. He turned to assist Mrs. Sylvester Cartier from the car and the two of them, tall and making an impressive couple, stood eyeing the crowd which had gathered, the policeman and the evidence of a fire – for belatedly a fire-engine had been summoned.

"*Now* what has happened?" demanded the man. He spoke resignedly, his voice low-pitched but audible to Roger. "Has one of your sorrowing gentlemen lost his head, d'you think?"

"Probably," said Mrs. Cartier, distantly.

She looked at Roger. There was no sign of recognition on her remarkably beautiful face but she beckoned him – it was an imperious gesture, that of a woman whom no man disobeyed. He moved towards her, reluctantly. Her eyes held an expression which he could not name, yet he read warning in it – the fact that she did and said nothing to suggest that she knew him might have been the reason for that. She had been instrumental in bringing him here – obviously that had been the real purpose of her call that morning – and consequently he was prepared to play her game.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

He thought he saw a quick, appreciative gleam in her eyes.

"Can you tell me what is happening here?" she demanded.

"Yes – there's been a fire."

"Where?" Her voice hardened.

"On the top floor," Roger said, "but no great harm was done, they got it under control quickly. I think there was some other trouble," he went on, "and a man was shot."

"Shot!" ejaculated the elegant man. "Great heavens! He wasn't killed?"

"He isn't dead yet," Roger said.

"You see, Antoinette!" The man turned to Mrs. Cartier, his large, expressive eyes filled with concern. "This is what happens when you indulge in such whims. A shooting affray!" He turned to regard Roger. "Are the police up there, do you know?"

"Yes," said Roger.

"My dear," said the elegant man, sadly, "I have always told you that if you persisted in this absurd quixoticism you would one day regret it."

The woman smiled at him. "You are always so helpful, darling!" she said, but her words and her smile hid barbs. "We must go upstairs and find out what has happened. Thank you!" She smiled radiantly upon Roger and then swept towards the door. Her companion – presumably her husband – sent Roger a single expressive glance, shrugged his shoulders and went in her wake.

"Strewth!" exclaimed the cabby, appearing from nowhere. "Did you see *'er?"*

Roger turned abruptly, tempted to rebuke the man for not waiting farther down the road. He decided that by his comment the cabby was simply proving himself human, and it would attract less attention if he drove off now. Roger ignored him and the cabby went to his taxi, marvelling. Bott stood rigidly by the closed door of the Daimler, looking past Roger as the latter glanced at him.

The remarkable behaviour of the beautiful Mrs. Cartier confused Roger. If the cabby did a good job, he would shortly know where Mrs. Cartier lived and what calls she made that day. He would not have been surprised had she decided to hurry away from the scene when she had learned what had happened but, apparently, as President of the Society, she was determined to see it through. If he believed all the inferences possible from the brief conversation between her and the man—was he her husband, he wondered? —the Society was a hobby which she took seriously and of which he disapproved.

He wished that he could place the man, who had seemed vaguely familiar.

Undecided, he strolled towards the end of the street and waited. He smoked two cigarettes before the woman reappeared, followed by the elegant one, who, even at a distance of fifty yards, looked discomposed.

Mrs. Cartier stood outside the house, ignoring Bott and the man. She

looked in either direction and Roger crossed the end of the street, deliberately. He saw her out of the corner of his eye. She turned on her heel and began to walk towards him, leaving the man staring after her. He took a few steps in her direction but she looked over her shoulder and said something which made him stop, at the side of a ladder reared against the wall. The woman had passed under it, the man stepped to one side. Then she swept along the street, tall, graceful, imperious. Passers-by stared at her in admiration and as she drew nearer Roger could see the heightened colour of her cheeks and the angry gleam in her eyes.

Roger walked back across the road, judging it so that they reached the corner together. She looked at and through him, but as she passed him she spoke out of the corner of her mouth.

"I must see you to-night, 11 Bonnock House."

She went past. A man nearby must have heard her speak but Roger doubted whether he had heard everything, the words could only have been intended for him. He had the presence of mind not to stare at her, but continued walking slowly. Mrs. Cartier looked about her, raised a hand when a taxi appeared, climbed into it and was driven away. Roger did not hear what address she gave.

Roger felt like swearing.

His plans were completely upset, for the cabby would follow the Daimler but not the woman, whose movements were what mattered. It was too late to do anything to remedy that, for the elegant man had entered the Daimler, which was already moving in the opposite direction. Roger saw the taxi come out of a side-street and follow it.

Roger felt as if he had been battered by a high wind, incapable of constructive thought. The woman had behaved like a wilful termagant and yet had kept her head. Obviously she had seen him, suspecting that he would be near at hand, and chosen that way of giving him a message, *11 Bonnock House',* he hoped that it would be a sufficient address. Thrusting one hand in his pocket, he looked at the traffic passing along the street.

Two Yard men passed him, on their way from the scene of the fire.

"This won't do!" Roger said aloud.

He hoped that Abbott would have Pickerell's home visited but decided that there was no point in going there himself. As things dropped into the right perspective he realised that his first charge was to try to see Lois Randall. He dallied with the idea of telephoning Mark and asking him to go to the girl's address but decided that it might lose precious time. He smiled ruefully as he realised that he would have much explaining to do when eventually he reached Chelsea. He looked at his note of the girl's address – it was 29 Chapel Street, St. John's Wood – and then found a taxi.

Twenty minutes later, he entered the Chapel Street house.

A board in the gloomy hall told him that the place, a large one standing in its own grounds and with an untidy garden and drive, was divided into furnished flatlets – two, said a notice, were vacant. Cards pinned against other numbers told him the names of the occupants and he found *'Miss Lois*

Randall' opposite number 9. Another notice told him that was on the third floor.

He walked up the stone steps, his heels ringing and making the quiet of the rest of the house seem ominous. He heard no other sound until he reached the door of number 9. There were two flats on that floor, opposite each other. He heard movements inside, flurrying footsteps, voices. One was a man's, youthful and persistent – it sounded more frequently than the girl's, but hers was unmistakable.

Roger rang the bell.

The man stopped talking as the bell rang. There was a brief, startled silence before the girl said: "Don't open it! Don't open it!"

"Lois, you can't—"

"I tell you not to open it!" she said urgently. "It might be—" she broke off.

In a low-pitched voice, the man said: "Look here, Lois, if you won't tell me what's frightening you and who you think might be coming to do you any harm, how can I help?"

"You can't," she said. "Oh, Bill, I—"

Roger raised his voice, making sure it would reach the room beyond the door.

"Don't let her go out the back way, it might be dangerous." The words sounded melodramatic but he believed they would have effect. There was another short silence and then 'Bill's' decisive voice.

"I'm going to see who it is. I can deal with him if—"

"Bill! If you do I'll never—"

She did not finish, for Bill's footsteps sounded in the room and then the door was opened abruptly. A young man stood squarely in front of Roger, a well-built fellow with untidy hair and intense blue eyes. His sizeable right hand was clenched and raised. He wore a tweed coat which had seen better days, baggy flannels and an open-necked shirt; he looked as if he had just stepped out of a bath.

"Well?" he demanded, ominously.

"Oh!" exclaimed Lois, standing on tip-toe and looking over his shoulder. "It's—"

"Do you mind if I come in?" asked Roger. He pushed past Bill, who seemed so startled by the girl's reaction and the obvious relief in her voice that he made no protest. Roger closed the door behind him and stood regarding the girl.

"Who are you?" demanded Bill gruffly.

"My name—" began Roger.

"He's a policeman!" Lois exclaimed. "He came to the office to make inquiries. Bill, send him away! I won't say anything, I'll have nothing to do with him!"

Bill growled: "Did you hear that?"

Roger smiled. "Look here, supposing we behave like sensible human beings? Miss Randall will be hysterical in a few minutes if you let her go on

like this and you won't help matters by looking bellicose." He took out his cigarette case and offered it to the startled Bill. The diamond ring on the girl's finger caught his eye. "I am a policeman but I am not on duty and my inquiries this afternoon are private ones. Miss Randall can help me; I hope she will."

"Send him away!" gasped Lois. "I—"

Bewildered, Bill turned to her.

"Darling, surely you're not afraid of the police?"

"Will you tell him to go?" she flared. "Or do you want to send me to jail, do you—"

"Nothing you have done under pressure will be held against you," Roger said, reassuringly, "and I've made it clear that I'm here in a private capacity, nothing you say now will be used in evidence against you." He was prepared to say anything to get her into a more reasonable frame of mind, although he knew that she was so much on edge that she was not likely to listen. In fact, he did not know how the situation would have developed but for the movement in a room behind them.

He heard it – a sharp sound, as if something had been knocked over. The girl gasped, turned and stared at the other door, terrified and obviously surprised that anyone was in there. Roger stepped to the door while Bill stood with his fists clenched, his bewildered expression angering Roger.

Roger stretched out a hand but before he touched the handle the door opened.

He did not know why he was quite so shocked, although at the first glimpse he identified the man standing in the doorway. The man had a twisted smile on his narrow face. His hands were deep in his pockets and he was clad in a narrow-waisted suit with padded shoulders, a gaudy tie and wide trousers. He wore no hat and his hair was carefully Marcelled.

Roger thought: 'Malone, for a fortune.'

"What's all the noise about?" demanded Masher Malone, swaggering forward and eyeing first Roger, then Bill and finally the girl. "Hallo, honey, aincha pleased to see me? I've just come to take you out for a little ride." He looked at the men again and his lips curled. "Scram," he said, "you ain't wanted. Vamoose and make it snappy. I don't like the sight of your faces! Get me?"

He stared at them insolently and with astounding confidence.

Chaper 12

“WHY SO FRIGHTENED?”

The man expected them to go. It did not seem to occur to him that they would refuse. It was as if he had surrounded himself with a thick crust of self-conceit which did not permit any question of his ascendancy over others. In his wide experience Roger had met nothing quite like this swaggering confidence.

Bill stared open-mouthed at him but the expression in his eyes suggested that his temper was rapidly coming to boiling point. The girl looked only at Malone; she was breathing deeply; obviously she knew him.

Bill made the first move, stepping forward and speaking in a high-pitched, wondering voice:

“What the devil do you think—”

“Bill, don’t argue with him!” exclaimed Lois. “Go away, please, both of you go away! I shall be all right, he – he’s a friend of mine. Yes, a friend,” she repeated in a pitiful effort to sound convincing. “Don’t worry about me, Bill, I—”

“You heard her.” Malone cut across her words; he put his head on one side and peered at Bill. “Scram, mister, in case you get hurt. I’m a friend of hers, see, a buddy. Get on your way.”

Roger watched the younger man and saw the slow metamorphosis. At first he had felt impatient with Bill, who seemed absurdly naive and young for his age, but the man’s eyes narrowed and his expression grew more shrewd. He closed his mouth and a wary expression filled his blue eyes. Then – the most surprising thing – he smiled faintly.

“So you’re a friend of hers, are you?” he asked.

“You heard me the first time,” snapped Malone. “Listen, mister, I don’t want to get rough. Scram!”

Bill’s smile widened.

“Come on, get rough,” he invited gently; “I’d like to see you. Lois isn’t leaving here with you, now or at any other time.”

“Bill!” cried the girl.

Malone’s eyes narrowed, his expression grew indescribably evil. He moved forward, sliding his feet over the carpet and taking his hands from his pockets slowly. Roger looked closely for a knife or a razor, expecting the gang leader to resort to some such weapon; as if he read Roger’s thoughts, Malone strained his hands wide open – they were quite empty. Bill stood without moving, body relaxed, hands loose by his sides. It was a curious situation. Roger felt as if he were outside it; the girl had obviously decided that it would have to be left to the two men.

Malone stopped in front of Bill, stared at him for an appreciable time, then moved his right hand swiftly and snapped his fingers under ‘Bill’s’ nose.

Bill *blinked.* He did not move, he did not back away hastily nor raise his hands. It became fascinating; the loudest sound in the room was Lois's breathing.

"You heard me," Malone repeated.

"Have I got to say my piece again?" asked Bill, lightly.

"You've said plenty," Malone snapped. "Clear out of this place pronto, or —"

"Go on," urged 'Bill', "I'm waiting to hear what you're going to do – or *think* you're going to do."

But for the girl and all the circumstances that had led up to this – the murder of Joe Leech was well to the forefront of his mind – Roger might have been looking at two youths, swollen with the sense of their own importance, showing off in front of a girl for whom they were competing. But there was a deadliness in Malone, matched – perhaps only temporarily – by the remarkable and confident calm of the unknown Bill.

Lois tried again. "Bill, it's all right, you don't understand. I'm going with Mr. Malone." When there was no answer from either man she went on quickly: "I'm ready, let's hurry!"

"Keep your trap shut," Malone flung at her over his shoulder. "Listen, fella. I said—"

He moved his knee up sharply towards Bill's groin.

'So that's it,' thought Roger, not really surprised by the tactics. He stepped forward swiftly, expecting Bill to be taken by surprise and stagger away, gasping with pain. The man did nothing of the kind – he swerved to one side so that Malone's knee caught him on the thick part of the thigh. At the same time he raised his hands and struck Malone on either cheek, flat-handed blows with the reports like pistol shots. Malone backed away, dumbfounded. Dark red marks showed on his cheeks and into his eyes there sprang an ugly glitter. Malone whipped his right hand to his waistcoat and drew out a knife.

The swift movement would have deceived most men but Bill grinned widely, moved his right hand and caught Malone's wrist. The knife dropped to the floor. Lois screamed. Bill seemed to move his arm negligently and Malone gasped and went flying against the wall. He came up against it with a thud which shook the room and made his Marcel waves fall over his eyes and face. Bill stepped forward and trod on the knife; the blade broke into several pieces.

"Would you like some more?" he inquired, amiably.

Roger chuckled aloud but no one took the slightest notice of him.

Malone straightened himself up, brushed his hair out of his eyes and shrugged his coat straight. More wary and with the evil glitter in his eyes enough to frighten most people, he approached, crouching, his hands outstretched and fingers crooked, like a wrestler. Bill kept quite still, relaxed and yet giving an impression of latent strength.

"Come on," he taunted, "I'm waiting."

Malone flew at him, relying on the uncanny speed of the movement to

carry the other man backwards. Bill moved to one side, gripped the man's arm again and repeated the first manoeuvre. The only difference was that he did not stand back after Malone hit the wall, but followed, grabbed his left wrist and brought it behind him in a half-Nelson – it was simplicity itself after the holds he had shown before. He dragged Malone upright and then for the first time acknowledged Roger's presence.

"Open the door, will you?" he asked, politely.

Roger was startled enough to obey.

"Thanks," said Bill. He ran Malone forward and the man could do nothing to save himself. Roger watched them go out of the room and saw Malone stagger down the first steps. Bill was clearly determined to make a thorough job of it, for he pushed the Masher down the stairs, their footsteps echoed clearly and the heavy breathing of Malone was audible. It went on for a long time before there was a scuffling and then Bill's confident voice: "I shouldn't come back, if I were you."

The girl stood rigid in the centre of the room. Roger stepped swiftly to the window and drew aside the curtains. Malone was walking unsteadily in the road, obviously crossing to the opposite pavement to get farther away from the human cyclone which he had released. His shoulders slumped and he was so utterly dejected that Roger could not repress a chuckle of satisfaction.

"It's not funny!"

The words burst from Lois, startling him so much that he swung round. Her eyes were blazing with anger but he saw that she was close to tears.

"Miss Randall, I—"

"You don't know what Malone will do to him!" she cried.

"He'll never forgive him, it couldn't have been worse. You—you're a policeman, aren't you? You've got to help Bill, you've got to make sure that he doesn't get hurt!"

"He seems capable of looking after himself fairly well," Roger said, dryly.

"You don't understand. Malone won't forget, he'll—"

"Go on," Roger said, gently, "what will he do?"

"Oh, what's the use of talking! I've warned you – why didn't you stay away, why did you have to come here? I might have persuaded Bill to be sensible!"

"I doubt it," said Roger. "I think he's a very self-assertive young man who would naturally resent Malone and his type. I shouldn't worry about him, if I were you." He spoke with more confidence than he felt, for he knew that in Malone the surprising Bill had made a bitter, vengeful enemy. "Who is he?"

She stared. "Who? Malone—"

"I know Malone," said Roger. "I mean Bill."

"Oh! He—he's a friend of mine."

"What's his name?"

"Bill."

"Yes, I know," said Roger, patiently, "but—"

He heard Bill coming up the stairs, running up the last few steps and walking breezily into the room, smiling with deep satisfaction. He had eyes only for Lois, although he spoke to Roger, proving that he had heard the tail end of the conversation.

"My name's Tennant, and I'm more than a friend of Lois's, I'm her *fiancé* – although sometimes she doesn't seem very sure about it!" He grinned, looking twice as confident as he had before Malone's arrival. "Darling, this has got to stop, you know. I can see you've been having trouble while I've been away but it can't be as bad as you seem to think. Don't let an over-dressed rat like Malone frighten you, his type can be handled easily enough. Ask the policeman!" He beamed invitingly at Roger.

"In more ways than one," Roger said.

"Eh? Oh, I see what you mean! I didn't think the rat would give me a chance," Bill went on cheerfully. "I thought he would be all threats and no do – he won't forget this afternoon for a long time!"

"No-o." Roger was sober. "Do I understand that you've been away and come back to find Miss Randall in difficulties?"

Tennant frowned.

"Yes, that's just what's happened – I've been up north for a few months and I'd no idea that this was happening until—" he paused, as if doubtful whether it was wise to go any farther. After consideration he added pointedly: "But that's none of your business, West. Do you mind leaving, so that Lois and I can go into things privately."

Roger smiled widely.

"Yes, I do mind! I'm in this, Tennant."

"I don't see—" the other began, obstinately.

"You will, in time," Roger assured him. "Lois has been persuaded to contribute one or two things towards ruining my reputation at Scotland Yard," he added, "so I've a deep personal interest."

"I don't believe it!" Tennant said abruptly, but he looked at Lois with a puzzled expression in his eyes. "Lois, it isn't—"

She stared at him intently, tears coming to her eyes; in anyone else Roger would have said that she began to cry deliberately, to get Tennant's sympathy and to save herself from further questioning. But he thought this girl's breakdown was genuine. She turned sharply, her shoulders shook and she walked blindly into another room, the door of which was ajar. She did not close the door after her and Roger saw her fling herself, face downwards, on a single bed.

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Tennant, stepping towards the bedroom.

Roger laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"I shouldn't do that," he advised. "I'd leave her for a few minutes. Is there a telephone in the flat, do you know?"

"There's one on the next floor – a public call-box."

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Roger said, and tightened his grip on the other's arm. "Tennant, don't let Lois leave here. Don't encourage her, don't let her persuade you to take her out the back way. If you're gone when I

come back there'll be more trouble than you expect, and she won't be safe unless she's with friends all the time. Do you understand?"

He expected the man to demand what he meant by 'safe' but Tennant looked steadily into his eyes, then nodded slowly and said: "I'll keep her here, don't worry."

"Good man!" said Roger.

He hurried downstairs, finding the phone on the landing and taking out some coppers. There was no sound of movement in the house. He kept his eyes on the stairs leading to the street, not convinced that Malone would accept even temporary defeat. He dialled his own number, grew worried because there was no immediate answer and was already imagining disaster at Chelsea when he heard Janet's voice.

"This is Chelsea 0123."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. West," said Roger.

"Roger, you ass!" Then in a loud aside: "Mark! It's him! Roger, when you come back, I'll—"

Roger chuckled. "Save your threats for another time, my sweet. I am in great need of feminine assistance, to take charge of a damsel in distress. I cast my mind round and after much deliberation decided that I knew no one better qualified for the post than you, so—"

He heard Mark's voice, Janet telling Mark to be quiet, then he went on: "I'm at 29 Chapel Street, *St. John's Wood, and I think Mark had better come with you. Will you hurry, darling?"

"Yes, of course," said Janet. "I—oh, I had the wind up thoroughly. Cornish telephoned and said that Pep had been shot and he wanted to speak to you. Has he been shot?"

Roger sorted out the confusion.

"Yes, but I haven't! Jan, just a moment." He took the receiver from his ear and reflected for a few seconds, then spoke again. "A quarter of an hour won't make any difference, so before you come here go to Pep's home, will you? Tell his wife that he's been shot in the leg, that it's not serious and that I'll see her as soon as I can. I'm not sure what hospital he's at—"

"It's the London," Janet said in a strained voice. "Cornish told me."

"Oh, good! You'll let her know and tell her not to worry?"

"How glib that sounds!" Janet said, after a pause. "What do you think women are made of, darling?" Her voice was honey sweet and Roger coloured a little. "All right," she went on more naturally, "I'll be there as soon as I can." Then, suddenly anxious: "Roger, be careful!"

"What fools you think men are!" said Roger, more lightly.

"No, I mean it. Darling, I couldn't bear it if—"

She rang off abruptly and Roger replaced the receiver, scratched his ear, then walked slowly up to the top flat. Janet was usually the least emotional of women, particularly when he was engaged in a dangerous case. She seemed easily upset now – probably because he was in danger from two sides. Yet, it was unlike her to show her feelings, it troubled him.

Tennant was still in the outer room, looking bewildered and peering

through at Lois, who was sobbing less violently but who had not moved. Roger looked about the poorly furnished bedroom. There was a small window, fairly high up – he did not think there was any chance of her getting out that way, or of anyone breaking in. He closed the door and then turned to Tennant, who said: "You do take things into your own hands, don't you?"

"In this case I must," Roger said, smiling and offering a cigarette. "How much do you know of the trouble?"

"Absolutely nothing!"

"You're sure?"

"Now look here, when I say a thing I mean it," declared Tennant, and Roger was prepared to believe it of the forthright young man. "I've been in Scotland for four months. I'm"—he grinned—"an unarmed combat instructor! Before I left, Lois was – well, she was just her normal self. As a matter of fact," he added with some embarrassment, "we'd got engaged during my last leave and I was rather in the clouds, you know. Her letters didn't say anything about what's been happening but a friend of mine wrote and told me that she seemed to be worried stiff. He didn't know what it was about. I didn't say anything about coming down but I managed to wangle a week's leave earlier than I'd expected. I found – well, she's as jumpy as a cat! I thought she would fall through the floor when she saw me. Then I realised that some damned swine – I don't know who they are – are pestering the life out of her. She's absolutely *frightened,"* Tennant added, his voice rising in bewilderment. "I can't make her say why, she keeps telling me that it's nothing to worry about and although I've offered to help her she won't listen to me. She – why, she even told me to go back!"

"More mystery," Roger murmured.

"Do you know why she's so frightened?" demanded Tennant. "No," admitted Roger, "but I hope to, soon."

Chapter 13

STRICTLY UNOFFICIAL

Janet and Mark arrived just inside the hour, primed by Roger's talk of a damsel in distress and therefore making no great fuss when they were admitted by Roger. Janet seemed to have recovered her composure completely.

Lois was in the bedroom with Tennant, who had gone in a few minutes before and who seemed to have been talking ever since. Janet looked radiant, with a high colour in her cheeks – probably the glow of excitement. That, too, was out of character in such circumstances, she was undoubtedly more excitable than usual.

Mark looked slightly peeved, doubtless because he had been so inactive.

"Well, darling?" asked Janet.

Roger said: "The thing to accept first, sweet, is that we've found the girl who paid in the money and—"

"What!" cried Mark. "You've found her and—"

"We can't do anything at all about it yet," Roger said. "She's been acting under compulsion and is so frightened that she doesn't know what she's doing or saying. And she's had a visit from Masher Malone," he added, gently.

Mark stared, bewildered.

The voices continued from the other room, Lois's occasionally raised above Tennant's; it was clear that she was still refusing to explain. Roger told the others what had happened since he left Welbeck Street and found time to explain the visit of Mrs. Sylvester Cartier and the Society of European Relief. They heard him out without comment, although Mark was scowling and Janet frowning very thoughtfully.

"So," he finished, "we've got to nurse the girl to a better frame of mind, because she can probably give us the key to much of it, although she'll almost certainly be in some danger."

"Ye-es," said Janet, "that's fairly obvious, darling."

"Sorry," said Roger, a little disgruntled.

"Are you going to ask for police protection for her?" Janet demanded.

"I don't think so, yet," said Roger. "I think if she were to be interviewed by Abbott she'd flop right out – he would give her the finishing touch and we don't want that if we can avoid it. No, for the time being I think it had better be strictly unofficial. We won't be able to get any help from Pep himself but we can use one or two of his men. Then there's this fellow Tennant, as well as we three. That should be enough."

Mark said thoughtfully: "I rather like the sound of Tennant. I wish I'd seen him handle Malone!"

Soberly, Roger commented: "He's made a bad enemy there; if only for the

sake of revenge, Malone will come after him."

"Roger," said Janet, "I think you're making a mistake."

"Where?" demanded Roger.

"By not telling the Yard everything," Janet said. "No, wait until I've finished!" she added as Roger was about to interrupt. "You've admitted that Malone is dangerous and I think if you told them what happened here this afternoon they would arrest him."

"Even if they couldn't prove much, they would be able to keep him out of harm's way," Mark said, quickly.

"After all, they should be able to do something about what happened this morning," Janet added, quickly, "and you and Tennant can say that he actually attacked him and uttered threats, can't you?"

Roger smiled, amusedly.

"Oh, yes! On the evidence of the three of us – always providing Lois would give evidence, which I think is doubtful."

"Who?" demanded Janet.

"Lois. She—oh!" Roger grinned but coloured slightly and Mark eyed him owlishly.

"Very familiar," Mark said in sombre tones, *"very* familiar, indeed. If I were you I wouldn't stand for it, Jan!"

"Don't beg the issue," said Roger, severely. "I was about to say that we could probably put Malone inside for a week or two, if we could find him. He won't fail to realise that we might lodge a complaint and he'll probably keep out of the way. That apart, do we want him under charge?"

"And you're a policeman!" exclaimed Mark, shocked.

"But also strictly unofficial," Roger reminded him. "You know as well as I do, old man, that you've often been a tower of strength because you could do things which, as a busy, I couldn't. If we put Malone away we may not find a way of getting in touch with the higher-ups in this business but if we let him run loose we'll find him after us sooner or later and can turn that to some advantage." He sounded rather pedantic. "I don't think it's a mistake, Jan."

"Well, you have put a rather different light on it," Janet conceded. "All right, we'll do it your way."

"Thanks," said Roger, with exaggerated politeness.

"What are you going to do with the girl?" Mark inquired.

"We'll take her home, of course," said Janet.

"I see a snag if we do that," Mark said. "Roger isn't out of the wood yet and there will be Yard men watching until he is. The Yard will know that the girl is mixed up in the case and I wouldn't put it past Abbott to demand an interview with her. Besides, you've already told him that you've found who paid in the money, haven't you? He'll jump to conclusions. This isn't just an attempt to frame you, old man, it's a pretty big show."

Roger said: "Ye-es. You're right, of course, but where can—"

"You could use my flat," Mark said, hopefully.

"Of course, the police wouldn't think of going there," Janet said,

sarcastically. *"That's* no good."

"Well, she must go somewhere," said Mark, slightly affronted, "and—"

"I don't see why you shouldn't go to an hotel," Roger said. "One of the glitter palaces would be a good idea, if we can get a couple of rooms."

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Janet, making Roger eye her meekly. "Those places are all doors and I couldn't be sure that she wouldn't run away or that someone wouldn't come and take her away. An hotel like that won't do. Don't you know of a small place where we could confide in the manager and put one or two of Pep Morgan's men to guard it – somewhere in the suburbs, if you can't think of one in the centre of London? On the other hand," she went on, "the more central the better, because we'd be close by. There must be such a place. I don't mind leaving home," she added, generously, "but we must be sensible."

"I am duly humbled," grinned Roger. "You're quite right, and I think I know a place where they might be able to fix you up. Mark and I would stay at Chelsea, of course."

"Lois," said Mark, with mild emphasis, "might have something to say about it, as well as her young man."

"I think we'll be able to persuade them," said Roger. "If they come out before I'm back, introduce yourselves, won't you?" He moved towards the door.

"Where are you off to?" demanded Janet.

"Only to the telephone," Roger assured her.

He was back in ten minutes. No one had come from the bedroom but the voices grew quieter – whether the couple had decided that it was not worth further argument, or whether they had reached an agreement, Roger could only guess. He told Janet and Mark that he had been able to make arrangements with the proprietor of the Legge Private Hotel, in Buckingham Palace Gate, for accommodation. He knew Legge, the proprietor, fairly well; it was a good class family hotel where they would be comfortable and where, if necessary, Roger and Mark could stay for the night. With that off his mind, Roger went to the bedroom door and tapped on it.

"Just a moment," Bill Tennant called.

There was another murmur of voices before the door opened.

Apparently Lois had realised that she had made a wreck of herself and she had made up her face quickly. It was obvious enough that she had been crying but she looked pretty and self-composed, very much better groomed than the untidy Tennant, who was a little embarrassed when he saw newcomers. The girl seemed to take their presence more for granted.

"I have nothing to say," she declared, quietly.

"I—I've tried to make her tell you everything," Tennant said, awkwardly, "but—"

Roger said: "It will all work out, I think. If Lois"—her eyes widened at his use of her Christian name—"doesn't feel that it's time to talk freely we'll have to accept that. There are other things more important. In the first place, both of you are in acute danger."

"Eh?" Tennant ejaculated. "Now, come off it, I—"

"Malone is a bad enemy," Roger said, "and his temper won't be improved by the way you smacked him down. He has friends, and you can't handle a bunch of them in the way you handled one." He rubbed it in, conscious of the increasing anxiety in Lois's eyes. "They won't stop at using knives and razors. Will they, Lois?"

Startled, she said: "No, I—"

"How the devil do you know?" cried Tennant.

"We've decided not to press that point," Roger told him, but he was puzzled by the girl's admission that she knew how Malone would fight. "Both of you are on the wanted list, so while Malone is free you'll be in danger. What I've arranged is—" he told them, briefly, of the Legge Hotel and the other arrangements.

He expected the girl to protest, but she did not. He was pleasantly surprised, for she gave him the impression that she was pleased with the suggestion. Tennant raised the only objections, saying with some spirit: "I don't see why I can't look after Lois. Anyhow, why are you so determined to hide her away, West?"

Roger smiled. "A nice point! Tennant, Lois will admit that she has impersonated my wife and as a result of it I'm in bad odour at Scotland Yard. If anything happens to her, and I seriously think it will, unless we take great care, one of the witnesses in my defence disappears."

"What defence?" demanded Tennant.

"The trouble is that you know only half the story," Roger said. "Why don't you take my word that the only sensible course is for both of you to stay at the hotel, in hiding, venturing out only after dark until it's blown over."

"I'm not going to hide from a punk like Malone!"

"All right," said Roger, resignedly, "when there's a chance for you to throw your weight about I'll tell you, but don't be obstructive now." His glance at the man said clearly that, with Lois more or less amenable, it would be wiser for him to withdraw his objections. Again he was agreeably surprised, for Tennant shrugged his shoulders and said that he supposed Roger knew what he was talking about.

"So that's settled?" Janet asked, eagerly.

"It—it doesn't matter what you do, I can't tell you anything," Lois said, obdurately. "I won't pretend that I wouldn't be glad to hide away, but I just can't talk. I *won't* explain!" Her eyes were bright with defiance.

Roger smiled. "Haven't we agreed that the subject's not to be discussed now?"

"It won't be any use saying that—that I came with you under false pretences."

"It wouldn't enter our heads!" declared Mark, brightly and with his head on one side. "When are we moving, Roger? Now, or after dark?"

"After dark," Roger said.

Tennant exclaimed: "Do you seriously think there is danger in daylight?"

"Oh, no," interrupted Mark. "He's going to this trouble because he likes the look in your eyes! Don't be an ass, Tennant. This business is serious and we haven't got anywhere near the bottom of it yet. Lois is in danger because she has information which might cause a riot amongst her erstwhile friends. Accept things as they are, you won't help things by being incredulous."

Tennant scowled but shrugged his shoulders and conceded grudgingly: "All right, I suppose we'd better work with you."

"That's fine!" said Roger, briskly. "All four of you, then, will go to the Legge Hotel. I'll join you as soon as I can." He had been edging towards the door casually and with no apparent motive, but now he picked up his hat from a chair and opened the door quickly. "Tell them as much of the story as they don't know," he added, "I'll be seeing you!"

"Roger!" cried Janet. "Roger – why, the old devil!"

She stared at the closed door then hurried across to it, pulled it open and stepped out. The door was pushed to gently as an arm slid about her waist. She gasped and Roger kissed her cheek.

"You scared me!" she protested.

"And I intended to," said Roger. "That's the kind of thing that is liable to happen in the next few days, my sweet, so don't run undue risks. I had to slip out quickly or Mark would have wanted to come with me and I'm not happy at leaving you and Lois Randall to young Tennant on his own."

"So you do know her surname," Janet said, sarcastically.

"Darling, you don't seriously—"

"Idiot!" said Janet, and squeezed his arm. She went on soberly: "Roger, I'm really beginning to get frightened, there are so many complications. Mark told me about this man Malone before—"

"You've much more to worry about than him," said Roger. "Some time this evening I'm going to see one of the seven most beautiful women in the world, a Mrs. Sylvester Cartier, in fact. Now if I started to call her Antoinette, you would have cause for pointed questions!"

"You seem to know everyone by their first names," Janet said. She sounded almost serious, but Roger laughed it off.

"Well, I have to be friendly! I haven't placed the beautiful Mrs. Cartier yet, she may be leading me into an elaborate trap. On the other hand, she betrayed the Society and Pickerell and I'm taking a chance with her. This is what I wanted to tell you about, darling – and I do *not* want Tennant or Lois to hear you tell Mark."

"What is it?" asked Janet.

"I'm going to number 11 Bonnock House," Roger said. "I don't know where it is, I'll try to find out from Cornish – he'll get the information for me. If I'm not back by"—he paused—"well, say ten o'clock, let Cornish know and tell him that I was last at the house with Mrs. Cartier. Will you do that?"

"Of course."

"Bless you!" said Roger. He kissed her and then hurried down the stairs. Turning at the landing and looking up he saw her standing quite still, with

her eyes very bright. He felt a little choky as he reached the front door.

Before he stepped into the street he looked either way, cautiously, and by the time he had reached the end of the street, Janet was in the back of his mind and he was contemplating the pressing problems.

He expected some sign of Malone or the man's gang, but there was no indication of their presence. Perhaps Malone was still brooding over the indignity. Roger's lips set tightly when he thought of the Masher; the man's capacity for unadulterated evil was undoubtedly very great. He even had doubts about the course he had decided upon but, when he was lucky in picking up a stray taxi and sat back in the corner, he concluded that Malone was more use to him free than he would be in jail.

The complications were increasing with somewhat startling fecundity, yet there was a single connecting line to which he clung with eagerness and which rather troubled him; there was a hint of desperation in it. He was no longer possessed by doubts about the reason for the Masher's arrival at the Saucy Sue. Malone had heard of Mark's visit and his gang had been summoned. There was nothing unusual about a race-course gang which, in its spare time, haunted the East End. Even today there were a number of men who managed to evade military service and stayed with the gangs. There were others who were unfit for service and yet well enough to roam the streets. Malone himself had an unhealthy pallor and Roger would not have been surprised to learn that he was medically unfit for any of the services. His confidence in himself was enough to qualify him for the leadership of a dozen or so hooligans.

There, then, was Malone – an unfortunate but not remarkable feature of the East End. There was nothing surprising in his activities *except* that he obviously did work for Pickerell.

Roger considered that meek and faded little man.

Pickerell had arranged the payments to the Mid-Union Bank; it was a fact which could not be repeated too often. Lois was probably a pawn, important now because her part in the affair had been discovered. Pickerell himself was the man who mattered and who, almost certainly, knew why the attempt to frame Roger was being made.

Lois had been all right – according to Tennant, who struck him as a reliable witness – until four months ago. Her trouble had started about the same time as Roger's. He was still without a clue as to the reason for the persecution but it was rapidly becoming clear that it was the result of something he had done or discovered the previous December. The fact that Pickerell employed Malone proved that it was a criminal conspiracy of some consequence and the fact that Malone had twice revealed himself suggested that the time for surreptitious action was past. There was some cause for satisfaction in that, for it meant that the culprits were getting worried – they were acting too hastily and openly, thereby increasing the odds against them.

Thanks only to Pep Morgan, the attempt to frame Roger had been no more than half successful; enough had been learned to convince even Abbott

and Chatworth that their suspicions were groundless. It would surely not be long before suspension was lifted, although he could not count on it yet.

Pickerell's swift *volte face* and the use to which he was prepared to put Lois's evidence proved that; if Lois came again under Pickerell's direct control she would probably swear Roger's reputation away. She was quite frightened enough to do so but he regarded her fear as incidental, something which could be dealt with when the chief problem was solved. It was doubtful whether she could do more than she had already unwittingly done – name Pickerell and Malone as the chief protagonists.

Still pondering over the connecting links as he sat back in the taxi – he had directed the driver to Pep Morgan's office in the Strand – he mused aloud: "So Pickerell and Malone are working together and Joe Leech knew something which he could have betrayed. Pickerell works—or he did!—for the Society, and Mrs. Cartier either knows something of his other activities or suspects them and decided to warn me. Which implies that she must have known of the effort to frame me."

He stopped speaking aloud when he thought of the elegant gentleman whom he believed to be Cartier. He wished, for the first time for some hours, that all he had to do was to telephone the Yard and start inquiries into the Cartier *ménage* as well as to receive a statement of the results. Those five-pound notes could also be traced. By now, Abbott and Cornish would probably be investigating the activities of the family and of the Society, but until he himself was fully absolved he would only get what little information Cornish could safely pass on.

The taxi pulled up outside Pep's office.

Chapter 14

TINY MARTIN ON THE TRAIL

Roger paid the driver off and, walking to the lift, thought that the other taxi-driver, whose name he had not inquired – a piece of carelessness which annoyed him – might be telephoning Bell Street at any time. It would be wise to send one of Pep's men to the house, to take possession and receive messages.

The door of the general office was open.

Inside, a long-faced girl with lank, mousy hair was sitting in front of a typewriter on a tidy desk and looking up at one of Morgan's operatives. He was a tall, lanky man whose trilby was pushed to the back of his head and who, Roger knew, considered himself a brilliant detective. His name was Sam; the girl's was Maude. Both of them looked at Roger, the man with a grin which irritated him, and Maude expressionlessly. She was at once the most discourteous and the most efficient secretary of Roger's acquaintance.

He hoped Morgan had given them instructions to take his orders – and the girl put his mind at rest.

"We've been waiting for you," she said; "if you'd been any later you'd have found the office shut up. We can't stay open all night."

"S'right," said Sam.

"Can't you?" asked Roger. "Pep's in hospital with a bullet in his thigh. What are you going to do? Go home and forget about it?"

"That's not true!" Sam said, sharply.

"No kidding?" asked Maude, narrowing red-rimmed eyes.

"If Pep's caught a packet," said Sam, his lean face sombre, "that's different, Handsome. On the square?"

Roger said: "Yes. He was working for me."

"Sure, we know," said Maude.

Roger knew that all the staff had a remarkable loyalty to the twinkling little man and was relieved that he would have no further trouble in getting them to do what he wanted. Morgan employed four regular operatives and had others who would do what he required of them – small agents who specialised in more humdrum affairs. These outside agents would be brought in to carry on with the routine work of divorce cases – the bread-and-butter of the agency – and the salaried operatives would be switched over to the more urgent matter.

He made arrangements quickly.

One of the operatives, called by telephone, left for the Bell Street house before Roger left the office. Roger had given him a key to the back door. Two were to be sent to the Legge Hotel within the hour; Sam, more serious than was his wont, was to accompany Roger. Roger would have given a lot to have had a sergeant and a plain-clothes man with him but despite Sam's

mannerisms and irritating self-conceit he was a reliable companion.

From the Strand office, Roger telephoned the Yard. He asked for and this time was able to speak to Chatworth. He thought that the A.C. sounded less hostile than on the previous night but no news of importance was vouchsafed although Chatworth did tell him that Pickerell had not returned to his Lambeth flat. When the police had arrived there, they had found signs of hurried departure.

"Are you sure that he was the man who arranged for those credits, West?" Chatworth demanded.

"Yes, sir," said Roger, "but until he's found I won't be able to prove it."

"What about the girl he employed?" Chatworth asked.

"What girl?" demanded Roger, thus burning his boats.

"Didn't you see one there?"

"There was a receptionist, yes," said Roger.

"Oh," said Chatworth. He sounded sceptical, but Roger doubted whether he had access to any information which could prove that his professed ignorance was a sham. "West, what were you doing at that Society office?"

"Making inquiries, sir," said Roger, and emphatically: "On my own behalf."

"Don't ignore the circumstances," Chatworth warned him.

"I'm not likely to, sir," said Roger, coldly, "but I'm anxious to get this absurd suspicion cleared up. Is there anything else?"

He thought he heard Chatworth mutter 'young pup!' under his breath. Chatworth said there was nothing else and did not ask Roger to go to see him. Roger had expected a summons and was puzzled when he replaced the receiver and looked in Sam's lazy eyes.

"Comes to something when your own boss don't trust you," said Sam, with surprising understanding; "they must be crazy, Handsome! Well, where are we going?"

"I've another call to make," Roger said; "meanwhile, have a look in the London Street directory for Bonnock House, will you? Cornish might not be able to tell me where it is off-hand." He dialled the Yard again and spoke to Cornish, who said that he did not know the house but promised to find it and to call Morgan's office. Meanwhile Maude, a cigarette drooping from her lips and a smear of ash on her soiled woollen jumper, leaned back and jerked the telephone directory from the shelf.

"S'matter with looking at that?" she demanded.

Roger stared, then smiled.

"Never overlook the obvious – you're right, Maude!" He turned the pages over, came to the 'CAR' columns and ran his forefinger down the 'Cartiers'. There were several in the book and he found three entries immediately beneath each other.

Cartier, Sylvester, River Lodge, Weybridge – 012
Cartier, Mrs. Sylvester, River Lodge, Weybridge – 29
Cartier, Mrs. Sylvester, 11 Bonnock House, Hampstead – 54012

Maude was contemplating him as he closed the book after making notes of the numbers.

"Got what you want?" she demanded.

"Yes, thanks. It's all right, Sam," he said as the latter looked up from the street directory. "What's the time?" He glanced at a large clock on the wall and saw that it was a quarter to seven. He had lost all count of time and had expected to find it a little after five; he was being more scatterbrained than the circumstances warranted.

"Ready?" Sam demanded.

"No-o," said Roger, "it isn't quite time to go." He tapped against the desk thoughtfully. "We'd better get some dinner, Sam, we might be working late."

"Want anything more from me?" asked Maude.

"Not to-night, thanks," Roger said.

"Watch your step, Handsome," said Maude; the ash fell from her cigarette.

As he walked down the stairs with Sam – the lift had stopped operating at half past six – Roger found himself oddly affected by the attitude of the girl and the lanky fellow beside him. He had expected to find them gloating over the discomfiture of a Yard man; instead, their sympathy, cloaked by an air of indifference but nevertheless sincere, was a heartening thing.

"Which is worth a lot," Roger said aloud.

"S'at?" demanded Sam.

"Just thoughts," said Roger, smiling at him, "just thoughts, Sam. You haven't got a gun, have you?"

"I been thinking about a gun," Sam told him, earnestly. "I got one at home, Handsome; I didn't think I'd need it, but if Pep's been holed maybe I ought to get it."

"I think you should," said Roger. "Where do you live?"

"Fulham Road," said Sam, "not far. I can have some supper with my missus and tell her I'll be late, as well as pick up the rod. Does that suit you?"

Roger considered, then said: "Yes, that'll do fine, Sam. I'll be at the entrance of Bonnock House, somewhere in Hampstead, at eight-fifteen. I'll meet you there."

"Okey-doke," said Sam, "I'll take a cab – no limit to expenses, I hope?" He grinned and raised his hand, getting a cab after three efforts, while Roger walked slowly towards Fleet Street.

There was a little restaurant near the Cheshire Cheese where he could get a good meal and where he might find one or two crime-reporters of the London dailies. He was on good terms with them and they would probably be helpful. He did not doubt that they had heard of his suspension and, when he entered the smoke-filled ground floor room he saw two men look up at him with evident surprise.

One pushed his chair back and approached him, dabbing at his lips with a handkerchief.

“Why, hallo, West! What’ll you have?” He was a middle-aged man, nearly bald and rather shabby. He was one of the best crime reporters on the Street and was reputed to have more enemies in the East End than anyone outside the police force.

“Hallo, Charlie,” Roger said. “I won’t have anything except some food – is there anything much on to-night?”

“Might be in time for some roast beef,” said Charlie Wray, turning to stare coldly at a younger man. He had close-cropped black hair which rose in a quiff above his forehead, a broken nose and a wide mouth with a most engaging grin. He walked with a pronounced limp. “That’s if Tamperly hasn’t had it all!”

“Share and share alike,” said Tamperly, swallowing the last of a mouthful. “I was coming to see you, Handsome. I thought—”

“I *have* seen him,” said Wray, pointedly, “this is by appointment. And don’t be familiar.”

“Oh, yeah?” Tamperly was young enough to relish Americanisms.

“Now listen to me,” said Roger, “I don’t mind whether the *Echo* or the *Cry* gets a scoop, I’m too worried to take sides in a newspaper scrap. I *do* want some help.”

“Say the word,” Wray said, quickly.

“All the organisation of the *Cry* will support you,” said Tamperly. “As a matter of fact, Handsome, we’re running an article on you – we’ve whitewashed you thoroughly. Had to use the story,” he added, half apologetically, “it’s all over the place.”

“Of course it is,” said Roger.

“Why waste his time?” Wray demanded. They reached an empty table, Wray fetched his coffee to it and Tamperly brought the remains of a plate of roast beef and vegetables. A buxom woman came up with a bowl of soup for Roger, greeted him with a wide smile and told him there was a steak pudding, if he’d like it.

“You told me—” Tamperly began, indignantly.

“They’re kept for the popular customers,” Wray grinned.

Roger said: “I know you two would like to cut each other’s throats, but if you could bury the axe for half an hour the time night come when you’ll be rewarded. Will you take fifty-fifty on anything that is thrown up in this job?”

“Yes,” said Wray, promptly.

“He’ll try to get sixty, but I’ll play ball,” said Tamperly, with his engaging grin. “What’s gone wrong, Handsome? I thought you were Chatworth’s white-headed boy.”

“So did I,” admitted Roger. “I’m being framed, but that will resolve itself. What I’m interested in now are two things – do either of you know anything about a man named Masher Malone with a gang in the East End?”

“By cripes!” exclaimed Wray. “He was questioned today about Joe Leech’s murder.”

“Lessing was at Joe’s. I wondered if it was the same job,” Tamperly said.

“Did you know anything about Malone before today?” Roger asked, patiently.

Both men had heard of Malone but, like Roger, they had not regarded him as anyone out of the ordinary. In their opinion, he would have his fling but one day would go too far and be put inside. Afterwards, he might gather the remnants of his gang together again but in all likelihood someone else would have taken over from him and he would fade into the background, considering himself betrayed. A big shot in his own imagination, he would look back longingly to the ‘big days’ of the London gangs.

“See if you can find out more about him, will you?” Roger asked. “Then there’s a man named Pickerell.” He gave them Pickerell’s address and the fact that he had worked for the Society of European Relief. At that, Tamperly’s grin widened and he said:

“You wouldn’t want us to go into the work of the Society, would you? How like you, Handsome! You don’t ask for the thing you want most!”

“I haven’t got to it yet, because I don’t know what it is,” Roger said, “and in any case I don’t think the Society is connected with it. I think it’s Pickerell only. He’s a paid servant.”

“Oh, yeah?” said Tamperly, sceptically.

“Please yourself,” Roger shrugged, “but if you want to help me, concentrate on Malone and Pickerell.”

“Nothing else?” asked Wray.

“Not now,” said Roger. “I—”

He broke off, looking across at the door, which had opened to admit an all too familiar figure. It was Sergeant Martin, long jawed and thin-lipped. Roger’s heart leapt and he looked about him quickly, subconsciously thinking of getting away and fearful lest Martin had instructions to detain him. Martin, however, simply looked about the room and went to a corner table, where he called for scrambled egg and beer.

“What a stomach!” Wray said. “But he’s on your tail. Nasty feeling, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know a worse,” admitted Roger. “I want to shake him off.”

Wray and Tamperly exchanged glances.

Five minutes later – it was exactly a quarter to eight – Roger left the room hurriedly. Before he reached the door he saw Martin get to his feet. He slammed the door behind him and hurried along a narrow passage towards the street.

Upstairs, Tamperly and Wray went for the door at the same time as Martin. Tamperly knocked against the man and apologised profusely. Martin snapped at him angrily and was half-way out when Wray, already outside, swung round with a muttered imprecation and cannoned into the sergeant, who staggered back into Tamperly.

Wray’s expression was one of bewildered apology.

“Sorry,” he said, “I’ve forgotten my hat. Are you all right, Tiny?”

“You’ll be sorry for this!” Martin growled. He recovered his breath and hurried past them, and the two reporters grinned at each other.

Roger was already in a bus heading for the West End, where taxis would probably be easier to come by. He looked out of the window and made certain that Martin had not been allowed to follow him. Wray and Tamperly would back him up in spite of their rivalry. He smiled and sat back until he reached Haymarket. He preferred to make the journey by taxi, for he might want to leave Bonnock House in a hurry and he had no idea how far it was from the nearest station.

He found a taxi, then kept it waiting while he telephoned his home. The voice of Morgan's man answered him promptly. There had been three telephone calls, two from Scotland Yard and one from a lady who had asked for Mrs. West and said she was her cousin. The taxi driver had not called.

Roger frowned when he returned to the taxi, surprised that his cabby had been out for so long. It was possible that the cabby had called when the house had been empty and, if he acted true to type, had probably decided that it was wasting time to keep on telephoning.

Roger sat back and smoked on the way to Hampstead.

It was already dusk and when at last the cabby found Bonnock House one or two uncurtained windows in the big block of fiats looked very bright in the gloom. He saw Sam by the drive but did not speak to him. Sam patted his pocket. One flat on the top floor of the house was lit up, a beacon of light which could be seen for miles around. For the rest, the house was a massive edifice of concrete and looked ugly and forbidding in the half-light. There was a drive-in and ample space for a taxi to park but Roger sent his man, liberally paid, to the end of the narrow street – which was on the edge of the common – then went on foot to the house.

Number 11 was on the first floor.

The flats were expensive. The passage was carpeted, the lighting was concealed and the decorations were in keeping with the general atmosphere. All the doors were painted black, the walls were of cream mottled paper which showed up clearly in the lighting immediately above it.

He rang the bell at Number 11.

He would not have been surprised had no one answered; he still found it difficult to believe in Mrs. Sylvester Cartier. But he had hardly taken his finger off the bell push when the door opened and a maid stood in front of him, small, neat, faded-looking – and reminding him, for some reason he could not really understand, of Mr. Pickerell.

"Is Mrs. Cartier in?" Roger asked. "My name is West."

"Yes, sir, she is expecting you," said the maid.

She stepped aside and, when Roger entered, closed the door. It might have been accidental but it seemed to Roger to close with a decided snap. He glanced sharply at the maid but she was walking sedately towards one of the back doors at the far end of the entrance hall. She tapped on it and entered. That door, also, closed with a decided snap.

"I'm being a fool!" Roger muttered.

He meant that he was being foolish to let himself think that there was anything even remotely sinister about the closing of the doors and the

manner of the maid but he found himself giving the comment a different meaning. *Was* he being a fool to come in here, on his own? Would Sam be a sufficient safeguard? It was nearly half past eight and Janet was not to call the Yard until ten o'clock.

An hour and a half suddenly appeared a very long time.

The maid came out.

"Mrs. Cartier will see you now, sir," she said.

"Mrs. Cartier," reflected Roger. A well-trained maid would have said 'Madam'. He looked at the little woman sharply but her face was quite expressionless and he told himself again that it was folly to think that the resemblance to Pickerell was anything other than fanciful. Yet he drew a deep breath as he stepped into the room beyond; he would not have been surprised to come face to face with Pickerell.

Then his fears and forebodings faded.

Mrs. Cartier rose from an easy chair in a room which set off her tall figure, perfectly gowned in black and gold, to perfection. The room was pale blue, the luxurious curtains maroon, the furniture Louis Quinze and the carpet thick and muffling his footsteps. Roger took the extended hand, resisting an absurd temptation to bow over it, then looked into the smiling face of the woman.

"I'm so glad you came," said Mrs. Cartier. "I have so much to tell you, Inspector. But first – have you forgiven me for playing that trick on you and pretending to wish to see your wife?"

Chapter 15

MRS. CARTIER IS HELPFUL

"No," said Roger.

He smiled but there was an edge to it and he saw the surprise which sprang to the woman's face. He imagined that she hoped the dignified room and her nearness and beauty would make him ill at ease, but he felt suddenly very sure of himself.

She said: "I—I beg your pardon?"

"Mrs. Cartier, we haven't time to fence," Roger said. "I haven't forgiven you for coming to me this morning with a half-story. I might easily have been murdered; a friend of mine was badly wounded. Had you told me what to expect and been as frank then as I hope you will be now, that might have been avoided." He eyed her steadily, seeing the bewilderment in her lambent eyes. He thought that she was as shocked by his attitude as Malone had been by Tennant's unexpected versatility.

"I understand," said Mrs. Cartier slowly. "So, you are not grateful. Inspector?"

"I am, very," Roger said.

"Yet you say—"

Roger smiled. "I hope I've made it clear that I expect you to tell me a great deal more than you have yet done. A great deal is at stake – but I think you know that."

"You mean your reputation, Inspector?" asked Mrs. Cartier, her voice very soft and her smile faintly mocking.

Roger looked at her steadily.

"I don't think that remark was worthy of you," he said; "if it was, I'm a disappointed man."

"Indeed?" she said, coldly.

He was afraid that he had been too blunt. Yet as he watched her expressive face and tried to judge what was going on behind her creamy forehead, he knew that he had adopted the right attitude. He had not come here to fence or to match his wits against the woman. He wanted information which he thought she could give him – and, if she refused, he wanted to frighten her into thinking better of it. She was beautiful and wealthy, and in consequence probably had an exalted idea of her importance; he had to bring her down to earth, if it were possible.

Then she threw back her head and laughed; her slender throat was flawless, her teeth very even and white.

"Come," she said, putting a hand on the settee, "sit down, Inspector! I shall like you; I thought from the first that I would." She lifted a delicately carved wooden cigarette box from a table at her side and flicked a lighter into flame for him, but she did not smoke herself. There was a small ashtray

on the arm of the settee, kept in position by weights. She was still smiling, but there was a more sober expression in her eyes and she no longer gave the impression that she was hoping to influence him by her beauty.

Then she startled him.

"I can help you, Inspector, if you will help me."

Roger raised an eyebrow.

"So it's conditional?"

"It must be," she said. "First, I want you to understand what has happened. My Society – and although you may not believe it, I have its interests very much at heart – has been used to conceal criminal activities, Inspector. I discovered that a little over a week ago. You can understand how shocked I was and how anxious to adjust the situation?"

Roger did not speak.

"I gave it a great deal of thought," she continued, slowly. "I must explain that I went to the office without advising Pickerell that I would be there. He was talking with the girl receptionist – so charming, don't you think?"

"I hardly noticed her," Roger lied, easily.

"Indeed?" She could not have said more clearly that she did not believe him; it had been a mistake to lie, but the need for keeping relevant facts to himself until he could merge them into a clear-cut case had become an obsession. "Then you must believe me, Inspector; Lois Randall is a most charming girl!" Mrs. Cartier went on. "She speaks several languages, which has made her invaluable, and her manner with those who come seeking help is admirable. I should not like you to think badly of her."

"Why should I?" demanded Roger.

"Because, you see, she had been going to your bank and calling herself your wife and making things so uncomfortable for you," said Mrs. Cartier, softly.

Half prepared for what was coming, Roger was able to look as if the news was unexpected. He jumped to his feet and stared down at his companion, his eyes glittering and one hand clenched. He stayed like that until she said, smilingly: "Please, Inspector, do not be so upset! She has done all this against her will. You should be pleased to know the truth, so that you can convince your friends at Scotland Yard of it. Don't you think so?"

Roger said: "If this is true—"

"Oh, it is quite true and I think I could find the—what is the word?—evidence, yes, evidence to prove it. The police are so particular about evidence, are they not? Please sit down, Inspector, and listen to what I have to say to you."

Stiffly, Roger sat down, tapping the ash from his cigarette and regarding the woman warily.

"I discovered this because I visited the office unexpectedly and heard them talking," said Mrs. Cartier. "Pickerell, the secretary with whom you appear to have had a difference of opinion"—she smiled her secretive smile—"and Lois Randall. She was being sent to the bank and she protested. He threatened her with some disclosure and, after a while, she agreed to go. I

hurried out of the office and met her in the passage, Inspector. Believe me, I have rarely seen anyone so agitated. She was muttering to herself and when she saw me she did what I believe is called 'fell through the floor'. I, of course, pretended that I knew nothing of what had happened. I was shocked because I had heard it said, clearly, that the visit to the bank was intended to jeopardise your position. I only knew you as a name, then, but I knew also that you worked at Scotland Yard and I realised the gravity of the situation for you."

"Yes?" Roger said, expressionlessly.

"I wondered how best I could warn you," said Mrs. Cartier, "and I decided not to telephone you or call to see you. I made inquiries among my friends and discovered that your wife is very active in voluntary war work. That gave me an excuse to call. I was so glad that you were there yourself, but I had planned to arouse the suspicions of one or the other of you – suspicions which would take you to Welbeck Street. I hope"—she was insistent—"that you believe me."

Roger said: "Why shouldn't I?"

"Is it my imagination, or are you being just a little difficult?" asked Mrs. Cartier.

"It's something of a shock," Roger told her.

"Of course, how foolish I am!" She leaned forward and rested a hand on his arm; her long fingers were cool and soft. "I must try to tell you everything very quickly. I knew from what I had heard that Pickerell was interested in other things than the Society. I considered the wisdom of dismissing him but doubted whether that would be wholly satisfactory. I wondered how I could help the girl and saw no way, but I believed that if you once discovered what was happening, you would be able to solve the problems for me."

"Did you?" Roger inquired, politely incredulous.

She drew her hand away and frowned.

"Why do you disbelieve me, Inspector?" Her voice was sharp and her expression angry.

Very gently, Roger said: "All this happened a week ago, Mrs. Cartier. Had it been two days ago I could have understood the delay, but you appear to have given Pickerell ample time to make his arrangements. Why did you conceal it for so long – and," he added, even more gently, "how did you learn that I was already in trouble at Scotland Yard? You've implied that you did know."

"But yes, of course," said Mrs. Cartier, her voice softer again. "I am sorry – I am not used to dealing with those whose whole life is spent in seeing the flaws in the statements of others! I will answer your second question first. I have friends, one of them on the newspaper, the *Echo*. I get a great deal of publicity for my Society through my friend and I asked her if she could find information for me. She brought it to me yesterday – she told me that you were under suspicion and had been suspended. It was at dinner last night," continued Mrs. Cartier, "and I believed her, naturally. She had obtained her

information"—she frowned in concentration—"from a man, a reporter, named Wray."

Roger smiled more freely.

"I know Wray, who knew about it."

"As for the other, Inspector," Mrs. Cartier shrugged her shoulders, "it was clear to me that this had been going on for several months. It did not occur to me that there was any great urgency. I wished to make sure that I did nothing which should jeopardise the activities of the Society. I gave the matter a great deal of thought and, as I could not discuss it with my friends, took a long time in reaching a decision. That is the whole truth and I ask you, please, to believe it."

"I see," said Roger. It sounded reasonable and certainly plausible, and he was more inclined to believe it than if she had accounted for the delay by some fantastic story. He was almost convinced that she was wholly sincere and it was not difficult to believe that she was. "I do believe you, Mrs. Cartier."

She eyed him without speaking for some seconds and then smiled with evident satisfaction.

"That is excellent! Now you know why I came to see you and you realise my own problem. I need help – I need someone's assistance to make sure that the Society does not suffer because it employed a rogue. Will you help?"

Roger said promptly: "Yes."

"So!" She pressed his hand again but he thought the action quite impersonal. He wondered what nationality she had been born and even whether she was naturalised an Englishwoman. "Now I will help *you,* Inspector – I have told you what you have probably known already, through Pickerell, because from what I could understand you interviewed him this afternoon."

"Who told you that?" Roger demanded, sharply.

"A Dutch doctor, who called there and saw you – he was referred to me and I have since seen him." She spoke very calmly but there was a smile in her eyes, as if she were enjoying some amusing secret. "He is an observant man! I knew he was there just before the—the misadventure, so I asked him whether he had seen anyone else there. He described a most courteous gentleman whom I identified as you. The doctor's name is Hoysen, Dr. Piet Hoysen, once of the Hague, and I will gladly arrange for you to interview him if you wish it. In fact, you may have his address now!"

"Thanks," said Roger, and smiled. "I will."

She stared, then laughed, jumped up and went into another room, to return quickly with a small black book. She opened it and, with her finger pointing at an entry – her nail was varnished a pale pink – she said: "There, Inspector – that will satisfy you?"

Deliberately, Roger took out a note-book and wrote the name and address of the Dutch doctor – *Piet Hoysen, The Netherlands Hostel, St. John's Wood, N.W.8.* He knew of the place, which had an excellent reputation.

"Now you are satisfied," said Mrs. Cartier, looking younger and positively gay, "but you are curious. I have promised to help you in return for your kindness and you do not know what else I can tell you. That conversation I overheard, Inspector, was very interesting. I feel sure you will agree. I will not ask you to trust my memory. Come!" She took his hand as he rose, then rested her hand lightly on his arm and led the way to a small library, book-lined and warm, as impressive as the lounge. There was a small period desk and, unexpectedly, a dictaphone. She opened a cupboard beneath the bookcases and took out several long, narrow cylinders.

Roger watched her, mystified and yet with great hope.

"You must understand, Inspector, that I am aware that some of the people who come for help are not refugees but Nazi sympathisers. Also, for some time, I have suspected that Pickerell was not all that he seemed. So I arranged for this to be installed. It was not always used, of course, and what I did was to go to the office when certain suspected individuals had gone to interview Pickerell and, by pressing a switch *outside* the door, set the machine in motion. Very clever, is it not?"

"Very," Roger said, sincerely.

"Thank you! I must say this – I have never before heard any conversation which I thought was in any way suspicious. Until my call a week ago I thought that I was wrong and had misjudged Pickerell." As she spoke she was fitting the cylinder on to the dictaphone, then she pressed a switch and said: "Hush, please!"

There was a faint whirring sound as the cylinder began to revolve after the current came through. Then softly, there was Pickerell's voice, alternating with the girl's. He heard Lois protest, with a note of hysteria in her voice, saying that she would not 'do it' again. Pickerell, suave and threatening, the girl getting nearer to hysterics. Pickerell's threats – always something he did not name – increasing. Then with a quickening tempo: *"Why, why, why?"* demanded Lois. *"Why must you try to ruin the man, what has he done to you?"*

Roger stiffened. Mrs. Cartier's eyes were smiling but showed a repressed excitement.

"My dear, that is no business of yours," came Pickerell's voice, *"but I will tell you that a few months ago West happened upon a discovery, which, if he but knew it, would do me and my friends a great deal of harm. Yes, a great deal of harm!"* The man seemed to be speaking to himself and Roger could imagine Lois standing staring at him, could picture his faded eyes and the thick lenses of his glasses. *"One day he will stumble upon the truth, my dear, and that would not do. It is one or the other of us and I don't intend that it shall be me."*

"What—what devil's work are you doing?" Lois demanded. The *'devil's work'* was in keeping with all Roger had seen and heard of her; for a long time she had been living on her nerves.

"That does not matter," Pickerell said, *"not to you, my dear. What matters to you is that unless you do what you are told I shall deal with you very severely."* His voice hardened. *"This is enough! Take the money, do exactly as you have*

before. You will be watched, don't be foolish enough to try to betray me!"

The talking ceased. There was a rustling sound, sharp noises which might have been footsteps, and then the unmistakable banging of a door. A laugh, soft and gentle and somehow bloodcurdling; Pickerell, of course.

"I must try to make sure that the bank cashier will be amenable," Pickerell said. *"I wonder whether it is all necessary? I wonder if West will ever remember what happened on that day?"* His voice was barely audible and Roger bent down, his ear close to the phonograph. *"The unlucky 13th,"* Pickerell said, and then there was a sound as if he snapped his fingers as he added in a louder, more angry voice: *"This absurd superstition!"*

There was nothing else.

Roger straightened up and looked into Mrs. Carrier's eyes. His were narrowed and yet shining. December the 13th, the unlucky 13th. He did not remember what happened that day but his files at the Yard would surely tell him and he would now be allowed access to them. With this record, he could end all doubts and all suspicion – Chatworth would have to believe him.

He could have kissed the lovely Mrs. Cartier!

"You see how important it is?" she said, eagerly.

"It couldn't be more so," Roger said. "I want the record, of course."

"Please take it," said Mrs. Cartier. "Be careful with it, there is none other." She took the cylinder off the machine, replaced it in its cardboard container and handed it to him. "You will keep your part of the bargain, Inspector; you will do all you can to make sure that the work of the Society is not interrupted?"

"I don't think you need worry about that," Roger said. "Is there anything else?" He smiled. "No, I'm not greedy – I'm simply trying to make sure!"

"I should not like to be a criminal with you searching for me," said Mrs. Cartier.

The remark was fatuous, of course, yet Roger did not quite understand why it struck a wrong note. He only knew that it did, that with the cylinder in his hand and the evidence he needed to clear himself there in unmistakable form, he was suddenly doubtful of her sincerity. It was as if his mind had opened for a split second, to allow him to catch a glimpse of something badly wrong, then closed up again and left him with an insistent, infuriating doubt. He did not think that he revealed it as she led him back into the other room.

The maid had been in; there was a tray with brandy and whisky and a dish of fruit. Two large, bowl-shaped brandy glasses were warming in front of a single bar of an electric fire. The woman approached the tray and looked at him questioningly.

"Will you have—" she began.

Without warning, there was a sharp exclamation in the next room, another, in the maid's voice, and then *Masher Malone's* clipped voice.

"Shut your trap! Where are they?"

Chapter 16

SITUATION REVERSED

The maid did not answer.

There was no sound until a sharp report followed as if he had slapped her face, and then the question again: “Where are they?”

“In—there!” gasped the maid.

Roger could picture her pointing towards the door. He went down and pushed the cylinder beneath a low table near the wall. Then he stepped to the door swiftly, getting behind it and motioning the woman towards the library. She took no notice of what he told her but stood staring, in line with the door. It did not open immediately, but one opened elsewhere. There was an oath from Malone and a stifled scream from the maid, who had given her mistress a moment’s respite by misdirecting the man.

A thud – a cry – and silence.

Roger thought tensely: ‘Where the devil is Sam?’

He looked round the room and cursed the fact that there were no fire irons, nothing at all he could use as a weapon. He thought little of his chances of overpowering Malone, even if the man were not armed.

Doors opened and banged back. Roger picked up a small upright chair and kept close to the wall. He saw the handle turn before the door was flung open.

Mrs. Cartier cried: “No, *no!*”

Roger swung the chair on the head and shoulders of the man who stepped in, but before it landed he saw that he had miscalculated. It was not Malone but a smaller man with pinched shoulders. The chair crashed down heavily and sent the man sprawling, the force of the blow carried Roger forward, so that he almost ran into the over-dressed figure of Malone. He saw the cosh in Malone’s hand as it moved downwards and caught him a paralysing blow at the top of the arm, rose and struck him on the side of the head. He staggered against the far wall, his ears ringing, agonising pain shooting through him.

“This way,” Malone said.

Roger just heard the words but did not comprehend their meaning until two more men entered the room. The fellow whom he had hit with the chair was getting unsteadily to his feet; there was a trickle of blood on his cheek and he shot Roger an evil glance.

“We’ve got them,” Malone said, with an economy of words which would have seemed remarkable at any other time. He glanced at Roger, and two of the men stepped to Roger’s side, one striking him with a clenched fist and sending him against the wall again.

Malone sidled across the room.

Roger, his eyes blurred with the tears of pain and the ache in his head

and shoulder getting worse, stared at the man's profile. There was the familiar attitude of menace about Malone, but it seemed worse because he held the upper hand and there seemed no way to turn the tables.

Roger could only think of Sam.

Malone stood in front of Mrs. Cartier.

His oily hair, dressed high so as to increase his stature, hardly came up to her mouth. She looked down at him, and even through the mists of pain and mortification Roger could see her draw herself up, disdainfully. Yet he believed that she was frightened – as any woman would have been frightened by such a man in similar circumstances.

Malone spoke in his husky voice.

"Listen to me, sister. You have a dictaphone at your office. I want it. Where is it?"

Mrs. Cartier said: "I—I don't know—"

Malone moved his right hand and snapped his fingers under her nose. She moved back a step, involuntarily, and stumbled against the table. The tray of bottles shook and the whisky and brandy swayed up against the sides of the bottles.

"Don't get me wrong," Malone said. His vocabulary was grotesque in its limitations, its sprinkling of quasi-American gangster slang. "Just say where it is, sister, and you won't get hurt."

"I—I don't understand you," she said.

Roger opened his mouth. "Don't—" he began.

One of the others struck him a flat-handed blow across the mouth. He felt the warm trickle of blood from his lips which had split against his teeth. He had intended to tell the woman to let Malone know, courage in such circumstances was not worth while, but he could not speak.

Malone struck Mrs. Cartier a savage blow on the right cheek, another on the left, a third and a fourth. Her head rocked from side to side, she would have fallen but for the rain of blows. Her teeth rattled and her hair, spilled out from its elaborate coiffure, fell over her eyes and face and then from about her shoulders. Malone gripped a handful and tugged at it savagely making her gasp with pain. Roger clenched his hands, but the men held him fast.

Malone stepped back, and Mrs. Cartier moved the hair out of her eyes. She looked older, her cheeks were red and already swollen and there was a scratch on the lid of one of her eyes.

"Tell him!" Roger cried. "Tell him!"

He was struck again, but half-heartedly; the men had not expected that advice from him. Malone threw a careless glance over his shoulder and then looked back at Mrs. Cartier.

"The guy's got sense," he said. "Where's that machine, sister?"

"In—in the other room," said Mrs. Cartier in a voice that Roger could hardly hear. She pointed an unsteady hand towards the library and then swayed back against a chair and slumped into it, burying her face in her hands. Her shoulders did not move.

Malone turned to one of the men by the door – there were two more there, including the fellow whom Roger had struck – and said briefly: "Tell him. Keep your peepers open."

"Okay," said the larger of the two. He turned and went across the flat. Roger heard the opening of the door and at the same time realised how little noise had really been made. It was doubtful whether anyone in the adjoining flats would dream of anything out of the ordinary. He was filled with a sense of horror mingled with hopelessness and a desperate realisation that he must do something. The cylinder which meant so much lay on the floor, behind a table where he had kicked it when he had first heard Malone's voice – and before long they would start to look for it.

Then Pickerell came in.

He walked with a furtive air. He was not wearing glasses and his face had a hang-dog look. He averted his eyes from Mrs. Cartier, who did not look up, and went with Malone into the room where the dictaphone was.

"Bring in the slop," Malone said.

Roger was hustled forward, unable to do or say anything to help the woman, but he wished that she would not sit there so hopelessly, her spirit so completely broken; she had been so brave, but the devastating suddenness and the cyclonic fury of Malone were too much for any woman. He had never regretted underestimating a man so bitterly, as he regretted his mistake with Malone. A small-time gangster! The man was not only powerful but possessed a ruthlessness which might carry him to many successes.

Malone stared at him, looking up with his narrowed, sultry eyes. Pickerell stood at one side of the dictaphone, Malone at the other.

"Can you work this thing?" Malone demanded.

Roger said: "Yes."

"Okay, work it."

Roger opened his mouth – and was struck across the face again. He licked his lips, wiped a trickle of blood from his chin, then picked up a cylinder from the cupboard, which was open. He pressed the switch and voices came through, a conversation between Pickerell and a man who spoke in broken English.

"Is that it?" Malone asked Pickerell.

"No, that's nothing." Pickerell licked his lips.

"Try another," Malone said.

He took the first cylinder from Roger's hands and flung it against the outer wall, where it broke into a dozen pieces. Roger fitted on the second with the same result – Malone flung that, too. There were perhaps two dozen cylinders in the cupboard and he tried one after the other. If Malone asked whether he knew where the wanted cylinder was, Roger doubted whether he would have the courage to keep silent. Only Malone's thoroughness, the slow deliberation with which he worked, enabled Roger to retain sufficient moral courage to say nothing.

Time was flying, but he did not give it serious thought. If Sam had been

coming to help he would have raised an alarm by now. It seemed useless to hope for outside help.

The twelfth cylinder crashed against the wall before Malone said softly: "You sure you know the one, Pickerell?"

"Of course!" Pickerell was as frightened of the man as anyone. "The only one that could do any harm was one when I—I gave Lois Randall instructions. It would only have our voices, I'm quite sure of that, Masher."

"My name's Malone," the man said; "use it." To Roger: "Go on, copper,"

Roger tried four more.

"Why don't you find out whether—" Pickerell began.

"Close your trap!" snapped Malone. "I'm the boss." He nodded to Roger, who put on four more cyclinders only to take them off and see them smashed. The carpet was covered with the black fragments, and the wall was marked where the cylinders had crashed against it. There were four cylinders left in the cupboard and Malone seemed prepared to hear them all. Pickerell opened his lips as if he were going to make another suggestion, but thought better of it. Two more cylinders went the way of the others; two more breakages and then there would be the inevitable questions!

Roger, his nerve steadier by then, was able to think more clearly. It was probable that they would start to question Mrs. Cartier. It would be impossible to stand by and watch, he knew that he would have to speak. He knew, too, that having heard the record, he had the essential facts to work on; if he could not produce the record, Chatworth would have to take his word.

But when Malone found it he would guess what Roger had heard.

There was one cylinder left.

Suddenly from the outer room there came a shrill whistle, the sound which Mark had heard near the Saucy Sue. It was clear and distinct and Roger guessed at once what it was – the gang's signal of impending danger. Malone jerked his head up and Pickerell gasped: "What's that?"

"Pipe down," said Malone; "someone's coming." He moved past Roger and went softly towards the door. Looking after him, Roger could see Mrs. Cartier still slumped forward in the chair. There was a touch of the bizarre about the situation, the contrast from the position when he had first entered the room was so great that the other seemed a long way off, something which had happened in a different world.

Voices were raised, but not loudly enough for Roger to hear the words.

Malone came back and spoke softly and with that evil glitter in his eyes.

"The busies. So you're clever, copper?" His teeth showed in an ugly sneer. "One day you won't be, you'll be kicking up the daisies. Where's that record?"

"I don't know what—" Roger began.

"You know," said Malone, "you *know!"* He moved his right hand with bewildering swiftness, and the cosh seemed to leap into it. He hit Roger over the temple, sending him lurching over the dictaphone, which crashed down with him. He did not try to pick himself up, for the room was going round

and the blood was pounding in his ears. He thought he heard voices and a cry of pain but could not be sure. Doors opened and closed. There was silence except—yes, except for a woman sobbing. He dragged himself to his feet.

It was not Mrs. Cartier. She was on her knees beside the maid who was sitting in a chair and crying, just as Lois had cried, and her mistress was speaking to her in a soothing voice. The passage door was shut but footsteps were audible in the passage; then the bell rang. Only the three of them appeared to be left in the flat.

Mrs. Cartier looked up at him.

"Please open it," she said.

Roger gulped down a lump in his throat and went unsteadily to the door. The bell rang again as he reached it. He fumbled with the latch and then pulled it open, stumbling as someone entered swiftly, as if to make sure that the door was not closed in his face. He thought he recognised the man but was not sure until a voice, for once lifted out of its habitual coldness, exclaimed: "West! What has happened—"

It was Superintendent Abbott!

Tiny Martin and two plain-clothes men came into the room and then the lanky Sam, at whom Roger stared with sudden understanding. The operative was grinning rather sheepishly. Roger knew that Sam had seen the mob come in and had guessed what they were going to do. Realising that on his own he would be useless, he had telephoned the Yard and made the summons urgent enough to bring Abbott and these men post-haste.

The thoughts flashed through Roger's mind as he looked at Abbott, licking his cracked lips.

Another thought came. Malone could have killed him and the woman, but had known that as the police had been summoned, it meant that he had probably been seen. After this, he would be wanted for assault and causing wilful bodily harm, but he had known better than to risk a murder charge. Nothing would start the police hunting so fiercely as that.

Malone's face seemed to loom in front of Roger, he took on twice the stature that he had in real life.

Abbott put a hand on Roger's arm and led him, gently, into the larger room. Then he changed his mind and took him to the bathroom. Only half aware of what was happening, Roger felt his face being sponged, warm water soaked into his cut lips, welcome and soothing. Abbott did not speak and his bony hands were surprisingly gentle.

It was over at last.

Roger dried himself on a towel which felt as smooth as silk. There were a few pink bloodstains on it but the bleeding had almost stopped. He dried his hair, which had been soaked in the front, and he was recovered enough to run a comb through it. His right eye was swollen but his left was all right and he could see Abbott clearly. The room was no longer going round and he felt normal, except that his lips seemed to touch his nose, and his head ached.

He said hoarsely: “I’ve never been so glad to see you!”

“I suppose not,” said Abbott, his thin lips twisting in a smile. “I shouldn’t try to talk too much yet, West.” He led the way into the entrance hall and the lounge, where Mrs. Cartier was sitting in an easy chair, with coffee by her side. The maid was stretched out on the settee, her face red and swollen with crying.

Mrs. Cartier had tidied her hair. One cheek was also red and swollen and the scratch on her eyelid was lined with blood, but she looked more presentable than Roger or the maid – and she was smiling, although with more than a touch of bitterness. She looked hard at Roger, her smiled faded and she said: “How it must hurt! Will you have—coffee?”

Roger croaked. “I don’t think I could drink it.”

“Then some milk – cold milk?” She did not wait for an answer but rose and hurried out of the room. She returned in a few seconds with a glass of cold milk which she handed to him. Then she asked belatedly: “Would you rather have it warm?”

“This is—wonderful,” croaked Roger. It was not an exaggeration, the milk was like velvet to his parched mouth and a salve to his lips. “I—I’m terribly —sorry.”

“Please!” she said. “I did not think there were men like it. Pickerell—” her lips tightened and she looked at Abbott. “You will not let them escape?”

“We will not, madam.” Abbott said, sounding aloof yet speaking with great warmth for him. “Don’t be afraid of that.”

Roger said: “Sam called for you?”

“Yes. But I think Mrs. Cartier is better able to tell me what happened,” Abbott said.

“I will, immediately,” said Mrs. Cartier. “Oh, I am so sorry that they took the record—”

Roger snapped, his voice suddenly clear.

“Did they?” He stood up too quickly, for his head began to swim, and he stepped to the cabinet beneath which he had kicked the record. He saw the cardboard container and beckoned one of the Yard men, who went down on his knees and brought out the container. The record was inside.

Mrs. Cartier said, in a clear voice: “I did not know! Excellent, Inspector! Now—”

But she broke off and the others looked towards the passage door, seeing Sam standing ill at ease in the entrance hall with one of Abbott’s men. There was a murmur of conversation before the door opened. A plain-clothes man stood aside and revealed the tall, elegant figure of Mr. Sylvester Cartier.

He stopped on the threshold, staring incredulously about him.

Chapter 17

THE AIR IS MUCH CLEARER

After the first shock, Cartier took the situation remarkably well. He had exclaimed at the sight of his wife's puffy face and looked at Roger without understanding. Then he had gripped his wife's hands and looked into her eyes as she said: "It is all right now, *cheri,* quite all right now."

Cartier took a blue and white spotted handkerchief from his sleeve and dabbed fastidiously at his forehead. Roger saw him clearly for the first time. He was too narrow in the jaw to be called handsome, yet he was a good-looking man with an excellent, almost feminine, complexion. His fair hair was thin and curly, his eyes blue, his lips full and generous. There was a foppish air about him, in accord with his manner, but Roger wondered whether any of it was affectation.

"Now perhaps someone will be good enough to explain this remarkable visitation," said Cartier.

"Cheri, I should have told you something of it before," said his wife. She looked contrite and Cartier stared at her in growing bewilderment. "Perhaps you will be patient?" She looked at Abbott and added: "I wish to tell my husband what has caused this."

Cartier stepped to the tray. The fruit knives were crossed and he straightened them, then picked up an apple and toyed with it.

"I should like to know about it myself," Abbott said. The man was positively human and Roger looked at him, surprised by this revelation, puzzled also by something else in his manner, although not hinted at by anything he said. He had been friendliness and kindness itself when he had bathed Roger's face, as if understanding a great deal without being told.

"That is good," said Mrs. Cartier. "Then, please, listen."

Roger admired her telling of the story, touching on all she had told him and elaborating only those details which needed a little fuller explanation. She included her visit to Bell Street and explained that she had seen Roger waiting at the end of Welbeck Street and had hurried off to see him so as to arrange for this visit. She admitted, with a smile which was almost coy, that she and her husband had quarrelled at Welbeck Street, and she made it clear that because of his antagonism to her interest in the Society she had hesitated to take him into her confidence. She gave Roger the impression that it would have to be settled between them and that she was prepared to make concessions. Her eyes caressed the man.

Then she told them what had happened at the flat.

Tiny Martin, probably the most proficient shorthand writer at the Yard, took everything down, occasionally forced to write so fast that his pencil seemed to slide across the page of his notebook. Mrs. Cartier gave no sign that she knew that a record was being made.

She finished: “I would have refused to answer, but the Inspector told me to. Did you not, Inspector?”

“I should think he did!” exclaimed Cartier. “I’ve never heard anything approaching—” he broke off, put the apple down, stared at Roger and then went on: “Had you any idea what Pickerell was doing before? If you did, let me make it clear that in my opinion you should have advised me.”

“I hadn’t the faintest idea,” Roger assured him.

“Are you sure?” Cartier stared at him intently.

“I do not imagine that the Inspector would lie about it, Sylvester,” said Mrs. Cartier. “And it is surely clear that as he was being victimised he would not know.” She looked at Abbott. “The wrong can be righted, I hope.”

Abbott so far forgot himself as to smile.

“Yes,” he said, “it can.”

Roger no longer noticed his swollen lips or puffy eye. Malone had receded, even the ‘unlucky 13th’ did not matter. He was in the clear. Chatworth would admit it as freely as Abbott. At the moment, nothing else was of importance, he believed he would have laughed into the face of Masher Malone.

The mood did not last for long.

He left Bonnock House with Abbott, half an hour later, when the flat had been scoured for fingerprints. There would be plenty of Malone’s on the fragments of the dictaphone cylinders, which were carefully collected and put in a shopping bag which the maid, now much more herself, brought from the kitchen. Cartier revealed himself to be an acute and shrewd fellow by his questions to Abbott, but, like his wife, he gave the impression that the main issue would have to be decided between him and Antoinette, who grew more vivacious as the minutes passed and, Roger thought, as memory of Malone faded. With her husband she was positively seductive. Yet he believed she would not easily forget Malone, it would be a nightmare memory which would haunt her for months. That was the first thought to affect his new-found exhilaration.

Although it was barely half past nine, he telephoned the Legge Hotel, to find that Janet and the others were there. He told Janet that he would be late and let her understand that the cloud no longer existed, and he smiled to himself when he rang off, her elated voice echoing in his ears. He frowned then, thinking of Lois and wondering whether the time had come to tell the Yard all that he knew of her. He thought it had, but as he left the flat with Abbott he felt undecided. Sam had gone ahead, smiling selfconsciously after Antoinette had thanked him by gripping his hand in both of hers and looking deep into his eyes.

The moon was rising and casting a faint grey light about the heath and the large houses and mansion flats bordering it. It shone dully on the three police cars outside. Sam had taken Roger’s taxi—

The thought of the taxi-driver who should have telephoned Bell Street entered Roger’s mind. He missed a step and Abbott said: “What is it, West?”

“I ought to telephone my house,” Roger said.

"You can do that from the Yard," said Abbott. "I telephoned Sir Guy before I left and I expect he will be waiting for us. I don't want to keep him waiting any longer than is necessary."

"I suppose not," said Roger, reluctantly.

At the Yard, Abbott went to the A.C.'s office ahead of him and he went into his own. It was dark and there was a smell of shag – Eddie Day's tobacco. He hugged himself as he gazed round at the dingy pictures and the threadbare carpet. It looked a tawdry place, far less impressive than when he had last been in there, feeling very sorry for himself. That was over, thank the Lord! Chatworth would already probably be listening to the cylinder and he would know that Pickerell, his motive now only partly obscure, had worked up the case against Roger.

Morgan's man answered his telephone call to Bell Street.

"Have you had any calls?" Roger asked, promptfy.

"No, it's been as quiet as you could wish," the man said. "Is there any need for me to stay, Mr. West?"

"I'd like you to," said Roger, "but there's no reason why you shouldn't go to bed – in the room where there's a telephone. Will you do that?"

"If you say so," the man said, indifferently.

Roger replaced the receiver, only to lift it again and call the London Hospital. He was given a good report on Pep Morgan, then, lighting a cigarette, he walked along to Chatworth's office. One or two men passed him, staring at him in surprise, and one of them asked him what he had done to his face.

Roger grinned painfully. The tobacco stung his lips and he knew that he was a fool to smoke but he could not bring himself to throw the cigarette away. He tapped on Chatworth's door and was bidden to enter.

Chatworth was sitting in his big chair, Abbott standing like a statue beside him; the dictaphone in Chatworth's office was near his hand, a cylinder – *the* cylinder – was in front of Chatworth.

"Hallo, West," said the A.C., without smiling. "You've had a nasty time, I hear. Sit down." Roger did so and drew gently on the cigarette. "Well, the air is much clearer," said Chatworth.

"I hoped you would think so, sir," Roger said. It was difficult to speak and his words were inclined to run into one another.

Chatworth tapped the record.

"I propose to take this as conclusive," he said, "although I must admit I'm bewildered – yes, bewildered." For Chatworth that was a great admission. "I could not bring myself to believe that anyone would go to such lengths to frame you, West. It"—he hesitated and his full moon of a face was sombre —"it remains hardly credible."

"I suppose so, sir," mumbled Roger. *Was* the man still doubtful? Staring into Chatworth's eyes, he decided that it was not a question of doubt but of sheer bewilderment and he felt better although the mood of exhilaration had quite passed. "You've heard about the unlucky 13th?"

"Yes," said Chatworth, and indicated two manilla folders on his desk.

“Here are your reports for December 13th – it can only be the 13th of December.”

“Of course,” said Roger, his heart beating faster. “Have you looked through them?”

“No, I’m leaving it to you,” said Chatworth. “But are you up to it just now?”

“I might get a brainwave,” Roger said. He sat down at Chatworth’s invitation and the folders were pushed towards him. He looked steadily into Chatworth’s eyes and went on: “Was there any other indication about”—he paused—”my alleged misbehaviour?” Now they were uttered, the words sounded absurdly formal. He knew that the evidence of the bank pass-book must have seemed conclusive enough and yet there was a lingering doubt – had it been on the strength of that alone that such action had been taken?

“Yes,” Chatworth said, “There were statements that you had conspired with the man, Malone, to warn him if action were to be taken against him —”

“Who made the statements?” Roger demanded.

“Joe Leech,” said Chatworth. “There were other things which we won’t worry about now, West – if I were you, I would go home and get some sleep. You’ll feel much fresher to-morrow. But if you want to look through those files—”

“I would like to,” said Roger.

Ten minutes later, puzzled and frustrated, he pushed them towards Chatworth. There was nothing which gave him any idea as to why he had been victimised because of a discovery made on December 13th. Certainly nothing he had put in his reports was important enough to have worried Pickerell so much. The only thing of importance on the day had been a visit to a mean house in Battersea, where a man had murdered his wife. It had been a miserable affair, brightened only by the solicitor who had taken on the murderer’s defence. He sat back after he had told Chatworth so and the glimmering of an idea entered his mind, only to fade again. It served mostly to remind him of the flash of doubt concerning Antoinette Cartier. It faded as swiftly, but made him feel uncertain and a little irritable. His eyes felt as if they were filled with grit and his tongue was like a plum against his lips.

“I spent most of the day clearing up the Battersea murder,” he said, “and that was nothing out of the ordinary. The man, Cox, had murdered his wife and buried her beneath the kitchen floor of a hovel in Battersea. Oliphant looked in while I was at the house. The other things were minor, sir, just details – they weren’t even my cases, I was helping someone else.”

“Get off home,” Chatworth said, “you’re too tired to think clearly.” He rounded the desk and held out his hand. “Suspension is lifted, West. I’m sorry.” His handclasp was very firm.

“Thank you, sir,” said Roger.

“And I’m sorry, West,” said Abbott, when they were walking along the passage outside. “I had my work to do, you know that. I will admit that I thought there was no doubt at all, I was quite sure that you had taken the

money."

Roger smiled, painfully. "If there was even more evidence than I've heard of yet, I can't blame you."

"I should have kept an open mind," Abbott said. "I tried to trap you, West – I told you as nearly as I could that I was coming to see you that afternoon, then I sent Martin to shadow you. I expected you to make a call somewhere else." The Superintendent broke off awkwardly, Roger could understand how difficult he found it to make such an admission. "I'm sorry," Abbott ended, lamely.

"Forget it," said Roger. "Oh, there's one thing."

"Yes?"

"Why didn't you detain me?"

Abbott shrugged. "We wanted to give you plenty of rope."

Roger said: "And you've no idea who I was supposed to be sheltering?"

"None," said Abbott, "none at all. I hoped we could get information from Leech." They were walking down the steps of the Yard, then, towards the Embankment; the moon was shimmering on the sluggish Thames and the dark silhouettes of barges were moving down river. One hooted mournfully. A car horn sounded not far away and a tram clattered along the Embankment a ghostly thing with its faint lights. "You have no idea where to find Malone, I suppose?"

"No," said Roger, "I wish I had! Well, I'll get a taxi."

"I'll drive you home," said Abbott.

"Not home – Buckingham Palace Gate," Roger said, and then stopped abruptly, remembering Lois; he had quite forgotten her while he had been with Chatworth. His mind was too clouded, he should not have tried to think, it only gave him a headache and depressed him. He went on: "There's one other thing you should know, Abbott. I've got the girl who helped Pickerell." Hastily, he went on: "Oh, I haven't kidnapped her, she's willing enough to take help from me, but she won't make any statement. Pickerell was blackmailing her, of course. I think it would be a mistake to interview her officially."

Abbott did not answer immediately.

"A serious mistake," Roger emphasised. "She might be able to give us a line if she's treated well, but I believe she's so frightened of the police, as police, that she would stay dumb."

Abbott gave a thin laugh; with a shock, Roger realised that he had never heard the Superintendent laugh before.

"We owe you *some* licence," Abbott said.

He did not even ask where Lois Randall was staying. Nor did he get out of the car outside the hotel, but wished Roger good night and then drove off, after promising to send two men to help guard the hotel, thus showing his keenness. Roger watched the rear light fade into the grey pallor cast by the moon, then stepped towards the front door. One of Morgan's men said: "Good night, Mr. West." There was no night porter and he had no key, but Legge, a rotund, jolly individual, came to the door promptly. After he drew

back bolts there was a noise of chains being moved – Legge was taking no chances.

Roger felt a momentary twinge of alarm.

"Is everything all right?" he asked abruptly.

"Why, yes, Mr. West," said Legge. "Why shouldn't it be? I believe your wife is in the upstairs lounge." The dim light in the hall revealed his wide smile.

"Roger!" called Janet. "Is it you?" She came to the head of the stairs and then raced down them. "It is!" She ran into his arms and he felt as choky as when he had left her at Lois's flat, had a resurgence of the feeling that she was more on edge than she was wont to be. "Darling, I get the darnedest ideas these days, I'm as touchy as—" she broke off, for he winced when she kissed him. "Roger, what is it?"

"I—er—I banged into a door," mumbled Roger.

"A door? I don't believe it!"

When she saw his face she refused to allow him to talk, although Mark and young Tennant, also in the lounge – Lois had gone to bed – were obviously disappointed. Roger said enough to make them understand that he had had another encounter with Malone.

Nothing was clear to him. He did not even realise that Janet sent a lugubrious Mark to an all-night chemist near Victoria Station for some zinc ointment to put on his lips. He undressed and his limbs felt like lead, his head throbbed abominably. He was soothed by Janet, as she helped him, but half asleep when the salve was rubbed in. Janet's face was outlined against the electric light, which she had covered with a handkerchief to save his eyes from glare. It made her hair look radiant and her face very soft and lovely. He smiled a little wearily, told her that there was no need to worry about the Yard, forgetful that she already knew, and then dropped off into a heavy slumber.

He did not know that Janet, deciding that he must have had a sedative to have made him so sleepy, stayed awake to watch until the early hours, when Mark replaced her. He did not know that outside, Pep Morgan's two men kept a ceaseless vigil together with two whom Abbott had sent along. He slept the sleep of physical exhaustion which was a reaction after the strain of the past few days.

When he woke up it was nearly ten o'clock.

Janet, in a dressing-gown, came in from the bathroom and the opening door disturbed him. He opened one eye – the other would not open. He heard her exclaim. He tried to speak but his lips were far too swollen. Only after he had managed to swallow a cup of luke-warm tea and eat some porridge did he feel better in himself.

He had to admit that he would not be much good that day.

After twelve o'clock, when he had bathed – he did not shave – Janet took him to a chemist where he was given a lotion to reduce the swelling at his eye, which was badly discoloured, and his lips. Abbott telephoned to tell him not to come in and he felt glad that they were not waiting for him,

eager though he was to find out what was being done. Later, he sent the two five-pound notes from the £1,000 which Morgan had found in his bedroom to the Yard, with a note asking for them to be traced back; he might learn something from them.

He kept going over the case of the man Cox, who had murdered his wife and buried her beneath the floorboards of the kitchen.

He persuaded Janet to let him send for the complete file of the case and spent the afternoon brooding over it. It was sordid, unpleasant and unremarkable. The motive had been greed – the man's wife had been on bad terms with her husband and had hoarded several hundred pounds in the house. Relatives had first suspected that something had happened to her, and the case had followed its usual course – once suspicions were aroused, and the body found, it had been a mere matter of routine. There seemed no possible mistake, certainly nothing which had not been disclosed during the course of the investigation.

Mark Lessing and Tennant went out during the afternoon but only because they were too restless to stay indoors. Lois stayed in; during tea, she seemed unable to remove her gaze from his battered face. Janet was remarkably good with her, Roger decided, and as his gaze rested on Janet he smiled, although it still hurt. Lois returned to her own room. She seemed content to stay in hiding, but remained quite adamant.

Mark and Tennant returned.

Abbott, showing a solicitude quite out of character as Roger knew the man, telephoned to say that there was no trace of Malone, who had left his regular home in Stepney, nor of his men, nor of Pickerell. There was nothing to report from the office of the Society except – Abbott seemed ill at ease when he admitted this – that the offices had not been guarded all the time after the fire and there was evidence that Malone had visited the place and discovered the dictaphone. The over-eagerness of Cornish doubtless explained the lapse, for the office should have been watched. It was reasonably obvious that Roger had been seen to go to Mrs. Cartier's flat, and that Malone or Pickerell had guessed that she had installed the dictaphone.

Apart from that, there was nothing.

In spite of the lazy day, Roger was glad enough to get to bed just after eleven o'clock. His face was much better and Janet said, optimistically, that the scars would be much less noticeable in the morning.

To their mutual surprise she was right. The lotion had performed miracles and his lips had healed, although he found it difficult, in the course of another day, to eat or drink anything hot.

He went round to the Yard and saw Chatworth and Abbott, as well as an enthusiastic Cornish – his eagerness unaffected by the slip at the Society's office – and an 'I-told-you-so-Handsome' Eddie Day, as well as a number of sheepish individuals who took the opportunity to say that they had been sure it would all prove a mistake. Chatworth gave him chapter and verse of the 'case' against him. Based on the payments into the Mid-Union Bank, it had been given credence by reports that he had been seen to visit Malone

(until then known only slightly to the Yard and as a man to be watched by the Division). Joe Leech had given categorical evidence, with apparent reluctance, saying that Malone had boasted that he had West in his pocket. Cornish had assessed Malone as a nuisance, before his transfer from the Division to the Yard, and the Division had continued to make that grievous mistake.

There was a report about the two five-pound notes, but a disappointing one; their last owner had been Joe Leech, who had often been suspected of handling stolen money.

On two occasions, in the past months, Roger had gone to the East End on inquiries which had given him an opportunity to see Malone. On both occasions Malone had come out of the house he had visited, after he had gone. Tiny Martin and Abbott had seen that for themselves.

"Oh, there was a case all right," Roger said to Janet, Mark and Tennant, on the evening of that second day. "Apparently Joe told Abbott that he had heard that Malone was bringing a packet of money to the Chelsea house and that he was going to put it in the bedroom. Thanks to Winnie Marchant, Pep Morgan had learned of it." (Pep was progressing well but was gloomy at his enforced inactivity.) "The only established fact is that Leech was bribed to lie about me, and then killed in case Mark forced the truth out of him."

"At least I haven't been wholly ineffectual," Mark said.

"So you think that's certain?" Janet asked. "I mean that Leech was killed because—"

"Malone was afraid he would crack under Mark's interrogation," Roger said. "Malone knew Leech well – so did most people in the East End. We – the Yard – had rarely found him to lie to us, he'd been a reliable squealer, otherwise I doubt whether Chatworth would have acted as he did. But when Leech told a categorical story, it made 'em sit up and take notice." That did not appear to rankle.

"We know one or two other things," Mark pointed out, sitting back in a winged armchair, with gay loose covers, his austere face set in lines of concentration. Tennant looked at him curiously, not quite sure what to make of Roger's close friend. "Pickerell is not even in authority over Malone but Malone isn't running the whole thing. Whoever is, knows him."

"How bright!" murmured Janet.

Mark glanced at her severely.

"At least I try," he said, then startled Tennant by beaming at him. "Any ideas, drill instructor?"

"Er—no, I haven't any ideas," confessed Tennant, only to frown when Roger and Janet could not forbear to laugh at his naive admission. "I don't mean about anything," he went on confusedly. "I mean as far as this business is concerned – look here, what's so funny?"

"Not funny – refreshing," Janet put in hastily. "It's a relief to meet a man who doesn't pretend that he knows everything! I suppose"—she looked very thoughtful—"Lois didn't say anything that might help on your last leave?"

"I've thought about it until my head's in a whirl," said Tennant, "but

there was nothing at all. When I discovered how badly she was feeling I had the shock of my life." He stood up and stepped restlessly across the room. "This doing nothing is getting me down," he went on, "if I could get at the beggars and put the fear of death into them it wouldn't be so bad." But he was troubled as well as impatient. "If only I knew why Lois is so scared! I can't understand it at all. She's got no relatives – no close ones, that is – and as far as I know she hasn't many close friends. Pickerell was blackmailing her, there's no doubt about that. So she must have—" he broke off, helplessly.

"A skeleton in the cupboard," Mark intoned. "Such skeletons often seem a lot worse to their owners than to outsiders. I shouldn't worry too much about that, if I were you."

"That's all very well," said Tennant, glumly.

"How long have you known her?" asked Roger.

"Oh, more than a year. She was serving at an A.R.P. mobile canteen during one of those little blitzes last winter." Tennant ran a hand over his curly hair. "She was as happy as could be and she had plenty of guts, too. She told me she was out during nearly all the big blitz nights."

"What part of London?" Janet asked; she seemed anxious to get away from the main topic. Perhaps because she believed that if she could persuade Roger to think of something else he might get the rest he needed; she knew that his mind was working at full pressure even though he had spent little time at the Yard. She glanced across at him. His lips were almost normal and the swelling at his eye was much reduced, although it was still brightly coloured.

"Battersea," Tennant said, promptly.

Roger sat up abruptly. "Battersea? Are you sure?"

"Of course," said Tennant, "I was stationed near the park, we had some training squads there for a while."

"Ease off it," said Mark, looking at his friend's set face, "you've got Battersea on the brain because you were there on December 13th! Forget it, old man."

"Did Lois live in Battersea?" Roger demanded, completely ignoring the advice.

"At the time, yes," said Tennant, colouring. "As a matter of fact, I persuaded her to leave her digs – oh, it would be about six months ago now. I don't like the people she lodged with. He was a pretty nasty customer and he and his wife were always rowing – I think he had an eye for a pretty wench. Anyhow, although Lois said he was always decent to her, I didn't trust the fellow. Sometimes his wife stayed out all night after a quarrel and I didn't fancy Lois being in the house alone with him. It's a district where neighbours don't worry about what happens in the house next door and – well, the long and short of it was that she moved to the flat at St. John's Wood," he added, "and I think she was a lot happier there." He frowned, for Roger was eyeing him with a peculiar expression. "Well, what have I said wrong now?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Roger assured him, "nothing at all." His voice was strained. "Did she lodge at a house in New Street?"

Tennant gaped. "Why, yes, how did you know?"

"Was the man's name Cox – Benny Cox?"

Tennant gasped: "Yes! West, what do you know about him?"

Roger spoke very gently, Mark's eyes were startled, Janet stood up quickly, obviously guessing what was coming.

"Benny Cox was hanged for the murder of his wife," said Roger in the same strained voice. "I was at New Street on December 13th, looking round the house. That *can't* be just a coincidence!"

Chapter 18

ONE MYSTERY SOLVED

"Yes," said Lois, "I knew."

She stood by the dressing-table of the room which she shared with Janet. She had been sitting reading and had not undressed. Her hair was untidy and she had not made up – she looked pale and in her eyes was the familiar gaunt, distraught look. Her hands were clenched by her sides, the book she had been reading was on the floor by her feet.

"You mean you knew that Mrs. Cox had been murdered," Roger said.

"Yes. I'm not—"

"Look here," said Roger, patiently, "I have tried to help you and I've given you ample time to think this over, Lois. I've used what influence I have at Scotland Yard to make sure that you weren't officially questioned but I always worked on the assumption that there was a strictly personal reason why Pickerell and Malone were able to force you to work for them. It begins to look as if that's not so."

"I didn't say it was," said Lois, tonelessly.

In the other room, probably close to the door, were Mark and Tennant. Sitting at the foot of the bed was Janet, who had come to give Roger moral support in the hope that Lois would be more disposed to talk in the presence of another woman.

As he looked at the girl, Roger wondered whether he would not have been wiser to have left this to Mark; probably she was more frightened of him because he was a policeman. The damage was done now, however. He had acted too hurriedly under the stress of the startling discovery, made so casually through Tennant.

"What Roger means," Janet said, "is that since he knows this he can't keep the other police off much longer, so you'd be much wiser to tell him what's worrying you. He'll help you, you know, and the police aren't ogres. They'll take into account the fact that you've had such a bad time."

"It—it doesn't matter," Lois said.

"I don't want to have to send for someone else," Roger told her, "and if you'll tell me the whole truth I'll do everything I can to make sure that they don't know it. Only if it has a direct bearing on what is happening now will I have to disclose anything – and even then I need not divulge the source of my information. Lois"—his voice was low and friendly—"I really shouldn't make such an offer, you know, but I'll keep my word if you'll tell me what you know."

She said: "You won't. You're like all policemen, as soon as I've told you, you'll—" she stopped, drawing in a deep, shuddering breath.

"You think I'll charge you," Roger said. "I won't. I'll give you this firm undertaking – if what you tell me means that you should be charged and

arrested, I'll tell Mark Lessing and leave it to him to get you away from here to a place of safety – and, officially, I won't know where you are."

The girl's eyes were clouded as she looked at him but Roger thought there was a glimmer of expression in them, as if hope were being reborn.

"I—I don't believe you," she said, but her tone suggested that she wanted to.

"You must!" said Janet. "Lois, I won't let him betray you." The use of the word 'betray' was just right, it put into meaning everything that the girl had feared. Lois looked at her, her lips parting, the clouds fading, if only temporarily, from her eyes.

"Will you swear that?" Her voice was barely audible.

"On any oath you like," said Janet.

They stared at each other for a long time. Roger seemed to be outside the immediate issue, watching the two women from a long way off. He read indecision in Lois's face and had to force himself not to speak at a moment when a single word might ruin every chance he had of learning her story. That she was worked up to a point where hysteria was never far off had been apparent from the start; he had thought that the reaction, when it came, would bring a full revelation. Before, he had not thought her evidence of outstanding importance, but now he believed that the girl held the key to the problem.

Then Lois swung round on him.

"I knew you'd worm it out of me!" she said in a low-pitched voice. "I knew someone would have to know but – oh, don't lie to me! Don't try to pretend that it doesn't matter, don't say that the police will take no action! Let me know the worst. I must know it. I can't bear the suspense any longer!"

Roger did not speak.

"I—I've worked for Malone," she went on. "I worked with him during the blitz, he used my canteen to hide—to hide things he stole during the air raids – yes, looted, *looted!* Do you see that?" She held up her hand, where the single diamond scintillated in the bright light. Her face was drawn and almost haggard, yet there was a blazing excitement in her eyes. "I always said it was my mother's. It wasn't, I stole it, I took it during the blitz; oh I don't know what came over me, I—"

She broke off, gulped, and then said in a steadier voice: "But what's the use of lying? A jeweller's shop had been hit. I wasn't far away. This fell almost at my feet. I knew I was doing wrong but I—I picked it up and put it on. The guns were banging and bombs were falling, there were flares in the sky, it was a devil's light and all the fire in the world seemed to be in that diamond. I kept it there. I told myself that I would give it up the next day, that I only wanted to wear it for a few hours, but I knew I was lying to myself, I knew I meant to keep it!"

She paused again but neither of the others interrupted her. They knew what she was feeling. They felt a deep sorrow for her because of the confusion of her thoughts and the losing fight she had waged with her

conscience, living with the knowledge that she had been wrong. Roger wondered how often such a thing had happened during the blitz. Her words were clear, cut as cleanly as the solitaire, telling the story with a harsh brilliance which matched it.

She went on: "I didn't know that a man had seen me. It was Benny Cox. He was a warden, he'd left the house just after me – I was on the way to the canteen. He didn't tell me at first but a few days afterwards he started admiring the ring and I knew that he knew where I'd got it. I thought he meant to try to—to bargain for his silence – he was a beast of a man, always with different women. But he didn't make any suggestions. What he *did* do was to tell Malone."

"Ah!" exclaimed Roger.

She did not seem to hear him.

"He worked for Malone although I didn't know it then. Malone came to see me. You—you know what he's like. He frightened me. I was so scared that I don't think I could have refused him anything. He didn't stay long, just said that if I wanted nothing said about the diamond I must do whatever Benny Cox told me to. He said the canteen would be very useful for hiding other things which were 'found' in the blitz. 'Found!'" she repeated bitterly. She paused for a moment, then went on: "Well, Benny brought me things, sometimes jewellery wrapped up in paper, sometimes furs, oh, dozens, hundreds of different things! I hid them under the counter or in the waste bin of the canteen. There was always another helper with me, of course, and several times – on Benny's instructions – I handed what I'd got to the police, to make out that I was being honest. Honest! It went on and on, all through the raids. I knew what it meant, I knew the penalties for looting but I couldn't get out of it. I—I knew I had only myself to blame, if I hadn't kept that diamond it could never have happened. But – it did."

This time she stopped and turned and looked into the mirror, as if she wanted to see the tears which had flooded her eyes. Janet stood up and stepped to her side, putting an arm about her waist, but did not speak.

Lois clenched Janet's hand.

"When the bombing stopped nothing much happened, of course, and I thought it was all over," she went on. "The only thing I'd taken was the diamond, I wasn't given payment for what I did. I stayed at New Street and Benny made no approaches to me. He wouldn't talk about Malone although I knew he worked for him. Then – a year ago – Malone came again. He told me that someone was looking for a girl who could speak languages. I know French, Dutch and Flemish. I left a translation office to join the A.R.P. He sent me to Pickerell. Pickerell told me that he knew exactly what I had done but that nothing would be said about it while I behaved myself. I—I had a bad time then," she said, "I thought it was a spy organisation but soon I found that it wasn't. I had to take messages to different people and sometimes to Malone. I knew that there was a lot of—of stealing. I had to take packages to different men, sometimes to jewellers. I realised that the Society was used as a distributing office. Mrs. Cartier didn't know, only

Pickerell knew that. I was so relieved that it wasn't spying that I was almost happy about it. I'd met Bill and when I moved away from Battersea, no one raised any objections. It—it became just part of ordinary business. I didn't think of it as crime for months on end, until—until they started to send me with the money to your bank. They didn't tell me what I was really doing, you were known only as 'West' and I didn't realise that you were a policeman until Malone came one day and I overheard what he said to Pickerell. But – what *could* I do?"

"Nothing," Roger said, quietly.

She stared at him. "Nothing? *You* have the nerve to stand there and say 'nothing'! Of course I could have done something! I could have told you what was happening, gone to the police station and made them understand it, I shouldn't have cared what happened to me. Sometimes I thought that it would be a relief to get it all over and to come out of prison after serving my sentence, knowing that there was nothing hanging over my head, but – there was Bill. And I couldn't screw myself up to it, I just went on and on – until that day when you came in."

She turned away abruptly. She fumbled with her handbag and to Roger's surprise she took out a cigarette case. Her fingers were trembling. He saw several little tablets in the case – or rather, their reflection in the mirror; Janet could not see them.

Roger snapped: "Don't be a fool!"

She swung away, making Janet stumble, and put her hand to her lips – but Roger knocked it away. The tablets flew across the room and struck against the far wall. Lois stood staring at him, wild-eyed.

"I—I don't want to live!" she gasped, "I don't—"

Roger gripped her wrists. He was looking into her face when the door burst open and Bill Tennant strode in, ignoring protests from Mark, who was just behind him.

"What are you doing to her?" Tennant demanded in a harsh voice. "You told me you wouldn't do anything—"

Roger spoke without looking over his shoulder. "She has tried to kill herself, because she doesn't think you'll be interested in her when you know that she has mixed with thieves and rogues."

"I don't care what she's done!" Tennant snapped.

"Do you mean that?" demanded Roger, looking into Lois's eyes.

"Of course I mean it," said Tennant, fiercely.

Janet caught Roger's eye. He pressed Lois's shoulders and spoke without smiling.

"If the worst comes to the worst you will perhaps be sent to prison for six months but it isn't very likely. By telling everything you know, you'll almost certainly be allowed to go free and you'll have paid for what you've done by giving information about the others, especially Malone. And"—his voice was very gentle—"you haven't done so very much, you know."

Then he turned and left her. Janet was already at the door and Mark in the other room. Janet closed the door firmly and they heard Tennant ask:

“Darling, what *is* it all about?”

“That’s exactly what I want to know,” said Mark, eagerly. “What is it all about, old man?”

Roger told him, quietly and quickly, glad of the opportunity for going over it again. He could see how carefully it had been built up, how the weight of her conscience had worsened her plight in every way and encouraged her to play into Malone’s hands. He had deliberately made comparatively light of it, believing that she had suffered enough already. He was sure that the police would take no action, provided she told everything she knew of Pickerell and Malone, and gave all the addresses to which she had taken the mysterious packages from Welbeck Street. He did not think she would hesitate to make a full confession now, but when he finished, Mark put into words one of the thoughts which weighed heaviest on his mind.

“They’ll know what she can do and they won’t let her stay away for long without making a big effort to get her,” Mark said.

“No-o,” admitted Roger.

Janet said: “The best place for her is in a police station. I won’t be happy until she’s in one.”

“I told Tennant so this afternoon and I think she’ll be amenable,” Roger said. “When she’s had it all out with him, she’ll be a different girl. I don’t think he’s likely to let her or us down.” After a pause, he went on: “Well, we’re making progress! I missed something at New Street, Battersea – I didn’t discover that Benny Cox was one of Malone’s gang, which was bad.”

“Do you think that’s the only reason they tried to frame you?” Mark sounded incredulous.

“I don’t know – it’s probably one of them,” Roger said. “Friday the 13th. Pickerell sounded pretty annoyed with superstition. I thought, when I first heard that record, that it meant he himself was superstitious but I’m beginning to wonder if someone else didn’t give him his instructions, someone who was influenced by the 13th. The thing is, if I had seen a connection between Cox and Malone I would have been after Malone very quickly. We’ve always assumed that Cox killed his wife for her money, but supposing she discovered what he was doing, supposing New Street was used for storing looted goods and Mrs. Cox threatened to tell the police?” Roger frowned. “Cox was a miserable little specimen and I can’t imagine him going through the trial and letting himself be hanged, if by squealing on Malone he could perhaps have saved his life.”

“A brick wall of some thickness,” Mark said.

“Ye-es. On the other hand, he may have killed her and, knowing that he couldn’t save himself no matter what he did, he just let things go. He acted dumb all the time – he was never very bright mentally. I once thought that the defence might try to prove insanity, Oliphant hinted at it once or twice, but Oliphant’s a good enough lawyer to know whether the plea would have a chance of success. He hardly said a word once he was caught, it seemed as if the shock was too much for him. Dull-witted,” he added, “*very* dull-

witted." His voice rose. *"Too* dull-witted?"

"What the deuce are you getting at?" demanded Mark.

Roger said, gently: "I'm wondering if Cox was drugged before we caught him and whether that made him seem so dull?"

Chapter 19

LOIS'S WHOLE STORY

Mark said that it was a possibility, but he wondered whether Roger were not allowing his imagination to run away with him. Roger agreed that it was only possible but he went into the other room and took out the files of the Cox Case. He turned up the medical reports and scanned them carefully. Three doctors had examined the man, one for the police, two for the defence. They were unanimous in saying that Cox had been a person of low mentality, very nearly sub-normal. The police doctor said that there was no doubt at all that he knew what he was doing and he was fully responsible for his actions. Obviously medical opinion for the defence had not really thought it possible to prove otherwise, and so the defence, in the hands of Oliphant, had not tried to sway the jury on the grounds of insanity.

'Reflexes, dull,' Roger read, 'pulse below normal, pupils enlarged . . .'

"Well?" asked Mark, after nearly half an hour's silence. "Have you found anything?"

Roger looked at him steadily but seemed to be thinking of something else.

"Er—no," he said. "That is—no, it *can't* be!"

"How brightly he goes on," drawled Mark.

"Be quiet!" snapped Janet.

Roger looked at her and smiled vaguely. Lois's voice came from the other room, only occasionally interrupted by Tennant's. Now and again Roger, hearing footsteps outside, looked up as if he half expected them to come into the room. He was on edge because he was afraid that Malone would find out where Lois was staying; of Malone's intention towards the girl there was little doubt. If she was found, her life would not be worth a moment's purchase – that was dramatic but an inescapable fact. Undoubtedly a police station cell would be the safest place for her, if she could be persuaded to go to one. She would be afraid that he was going back on his promise, of course. The very word 'cell' might make her withdraw all she had said.

He thought again of Friday the 13th.

The sordid little house, the floorboards, the nauseating smell, the 'straightforward' murder and the dull-witted Cox. He remembered him at the police station awaiting the second hearing at the police court; he had been remanded for eight days at the first.

"I just can't credit it!" he exclaimed, standing up and pushing his chair back.

Mark shrugged his shoulders and said in sepulchral tones: "The great policeman is slowly going insane."

This time Janet said: "Can't we help, Roger?"

"No-o," said Roger, brushing his hair back, slowly, as he recollected. "No. That is – I was at New Street collecting all the paraphernalia of evidence.

The camera work was done, and the fingerprints. I'd found the hammer which Cox used. There were bloodstains on the wood, he hadn't cleaned it properly, and it certainly caused the wounds in his wife's scalp. In short, all the evidence was there. I was going off, feeling fully satisfied although it was a beastly show and I've never liked that kind of case. Then—"

He paused.

Mark no longer acted the fool, but eyed his friend intently. The voices came from the other room in a steady ripple.

"A taxi drew up outside," Roger said. "Oliphant came out. Oliphant," he repeated, softly, "saying that he had been asked to act for Benny Cox." He leaned back in his chair with his eyes closed. He saw the portly solicitor, Mortimer Oliphant, a well-known lawyer who frequently acted for poorer criminals. He was ambitious and took on difficult jobs which a less forceful solicitor would have refused. He worked for the *Poor Person's Legal Society* and was one of its brighter members. Penniless or briefless barristers often accepted bad cases when the defendants could not afford legal aid, and the court paid them. Some solicitors set aside a special section of their business to handle such cases, but for the most part it was a question of fighting for a lost cause. It was rare that a defendant who had to be granted legal aid had anything of a case, seldom that he got off – not because he was not well defended, but because he was so obviously guilty.

Mortimer Oliphant was in a different category from the usual poor man's lawyer.

He had a man at the courts regularly, watching, and when a case appeared particularly tricky, or when there seemed to be the slightest chance of pulling off an odds-against case, he would volunteer to take it. He briefed young barristers who usually did well. His reputation was excellent and he often managed to win a case which the police thought was a foregone conclusion. A man of middle age, he had a large private income, and he always claimed that he specialised in criminal cases because he liked the excitement of matching his wits against the police. Roger knew him well.

He remembered the smile on Oliphant's open face when he had squeezed along the narrow passage and seen Roger in the kitchen. He had pulled a wry face and said that he hoped it wasn't necessary to stay in that atmosphere for long. Roger had not thought twice about his appearance, for he had guessed why he had come.

"I'm going to look after Benny Cox," Oliphant had said.

Roger remembered smiling. "You've backed a loser this time!"

"Oh, I don't know," Oliphant had said, "anyhow, it will give me some mental exercise, West. I always enjoy a few rounds with you. You don't mind if I look round?"

Roger remembered admiring the man's thoroughness. Few solicitors would have taken the trouble to come to the scene of the crime. He had thought nothing of it even when he had read through his report for the day – *'Oliphant saw me at New Street, and said that he was going to handle Cox's*

defence.' He had not troubled to go over it again, because it was characteristic of Oliphant. Also, he came to the Yard more often and asked for the information. Being a likeable fellow, one somehow always gave him what he wanted, within the necessary limits laid down by common sense and regulations. If he didn't get all he wanted, he took no umbrage.

Well-dressed, dark, with a good, olive complexion and smiling eyes, he was always amiable and even placid, but with a quick mind and a ready wit. Every man at Scotland Yard knew and trusted him.

"Oliphant," said Mark, quietly. "Didn't you say that he handled Cox's defence?"

Janet answered for Roger. "Yes."

"You think—" Mark began, but then his voice trailed off.

"I *can't* think of anything else which might have made Malone and his leaders fear that I might have seen what was happening," Roger said. "He doesn't often visit the scene of the crime – he usually gets to the case when it's too late – but he was very quick this time. Supposing he was briefed by Malone or whoever Malone is working for? Supposing he realised afterwards that his eagerness might have been suspect? He would tell his client, of course. The client is superstitious. It happened on the 13th – 'one of these days West is bound to see something funny in it, we'll have to make sure that he can't do any harm'. It would answer nearly everything," Roger said.

"Would Oliphant"—Mark paused, for he knew the solicitor well and found the suspicions hard to believe—"let anyone go for you, Roger?"

"He might," said Roger. "He might even have thought that I was keeping something up my sleeve – I was feeling in a good mood that morning and I put in one or two cryptic statements, the kind of hot air that bubbles out when everything has gone well. Oliphant might have misread my attitude. He might have discussed it with his client. You know, Mark, the framing was clever. Not too obvious, just enough to make reasonably sure that Chatworth would have to take notice of it. Whoever planned it knew Leech's reputation with us. Malone might have known everything else, but he couldn't have known that we relied so much on Leech. Oliphant would. I wonder"—he stood up slowly—"I wonder who the legal adviser to the Society of European Relief is? Mark, telephone Mrs. Cartier and ask her, will you? I—no, that would be asking for trouble. She might not be quite so honest as she's made out, in spite of Malone's visit. We'd better phone the Yard."

"I'll do it," said Mark, promptly.

When he left the room Roger and Janet eyed each other very thoughtfully, Janet with a hopeful gleam in her eyes, Roger still deep in the problem. Oliphant loomed so much in his mind that he did not notice the louder note of Tennant's voice in the next room.

The door opened and Tennant strode out, beaming, holding Lois by the hand – and Lois seemed much more at peace.

"It's all right!" declared Tennant, triumphantly.

"What's all right?" asked Roger, startled.

"I've fixed it – I mean, we've fixed it," said Tennant, squeezing Lois's

waist. “She’s told me everything, West, everything. There’s no need for you to question her again, I’ve got it all written down. You want the names of the people she went to see, don’t you?”

“I do,” said Roger, at last forcing himself to think of something and someone other than Oliphant.

“I knew you would,” said Tennant, “and she’s remembered a dozen – they’re all on the list, *and* the gist of what she told you.” He put a small note-book in front of Roger, and beamed widely. “All written in ink and Lois has signed it. But,” he added with a quick frown, “you’ve got to keep your side of the bargain. I don’t know much about the law but I do know there’s such a thing as King’s Evidence. If this isn’t King’s Evidence, I don’t know what is!”

Roger smiled. “Yes, you’re right.” He looked at Lois reassuringly. “Don’t worry about it, Lois, it will all work out well for you. We’re far more interested in finding these people and getting at their crimes than we are in punishing a girl for a momentary temptation.” He wondered if it were wise to deal with that quite so lightly and decided that it would do more good than harm; no one could have repented a crime more than this girl.

She looked more rested, tired but with a settled expression in her eyes.

Before he looked at the list, Roger said: “There’s just one thing. While Malone is free—”

“I’ve talked to her about that,” Tennant said: “this afternoon you said the safest place for her would be a police cell, didn’t you? Confound it, Malone can’t get into one of those! Well,” he looked brightly into Roger’s eyes, “Lois agrees!”

Lois nodded.

“Good girl!” said Roger, warmly.

He did not know how Tennant had contrived it but he had made the girl feel that it was wise and safe to trust the police. She did not protest, nor did she try to stipulate any conditions.

Before going to Mark, who was still on the phone to the Yard, and taking over from him, he ran his eye down the list of names and addresses which Lois had dictated to Tennant, thinking that it would probably be enough to break the case wide open. The last entry but one made him start and look up eagerly into her eyes.

“Oliphant – Mortimer Oliphant, at Cheyne Walk, Chelsea?”

“Yes,” said Lois, quietly.

“Did you go there often?”

“We-ell – half a dozen times,” said Lois, “and sometimes he came to the office, he was the Society’s legal adviser. Pickerell always saw him alone.” She hesitated. “I rather liked him, he was always very friendly.”

“Oh, yes, he would be,” Roger said, “he would be very friendly indeed! Lois, you’ve done marvels!”

Mark came back as he spoke, like a man with good tidings, but suddenly deflated when he learned that Lois had already given the information. It was not a case, Mark said much later, in which he had the best of luck. He heard

of the other arrangements and shot a glance of congratulation at the triumphant Tennant, who seemed to see nothing ironic in the fact that he had succeeded in persuading Lois to find safety in a police cell.

Roger felt on edge, in spite of the way the case was shaping. He wanted to see Oliphant, to report his discoveries, to make sure that Lois *was* safe. Vaguely, he realised that few men had made such an impression on him as Malone. He did not feel sure that the short journey to the Yard could be negotiated safely and he went out, to see Pep Morgan's men and the two police who were watching the hotel. They assured him that nothing suspicious had happened. He sent one of the police to the Yard to get a car, not taking the chance of getting a hired taxi that was employed by Malone. He laughed at his fears and yet remained on edge while he sat at the back of the car with Lois.

The policeman drove.

Tennant had been persuaded, with some difficulty, to stay behind. Mark had accepted the inevitable with commendable fortitude, but Janet would have her hands full with the two impatient men – she had been much more herself.

The girl was very quiet. She did not seem to share any of his alarm.

As they turned into Parliament Square, he said: "We won't be long, now."

Lois spoke quietly.

"Mr. West, I—" she paused.

"Yes?" said Roger.

"I—ought to thank you. Those tablets—"

"Forget them," Roger said. "I have." As he spoke he realised what a fool he was, how the spectre of Malone and the dazzling prospect of outwitting Oliphant had driven other, more practical, thought from his mind. "That is, I'd forgotten you were going to take them," he amended hastily. "Where did you get them from, Lois?"

"Pickerell," she said, quietly.

"You know what's in them?"

"Yes," she said, "they're cyanic acid."

He drew in a sharp breath. "My oath, that's doing it properly! Did he tell you what was in them?"

"No," said Lois, "I took some from a bottle on his desk. He always had them by him. I've heard him say that he would rather die than be caught. I —I felt the same, so I took them. I don't think he missed them."

"How did you know what was in them?" Roger asked.

"He once told Malone."

"Oh," said Roger.

He wished he could understand why she had been quite so determined to keep silent. She must have realised the gravity of the situation. Time and time again she had been compelled to face up to it, and yet until almost the last she had refused to speak. Then, for the first time, he wondered whether she had told *all* the truth. He was going to assure Chatworth that she had; meant to use his influence to make sure that she was not victimised; yet –

could there be something else?

He was uneasy when he walked up the steps of the Yard and yet he did and said nothing to give Lois an inkling of his doubts. Although it was late, he took her to Abbott's office. He wished some other Superintendent were in charge, for Abbott might have a bad effect on her. Surprisingly, however, Abbott greeted her without a fuss, listened to the story, and then spoke gently and reassuringly. Perhaps, thought Roger, Abbott understood something of what was in the girl's mind and the importance of what might come from it. At all events, the man did nothing to make Lois regret her decision and, less than an hour afterwards, Roger took her across the dark square and through the gates to Cannon Row, where she was housed in one of the rooms, not a cell. Roger saw her quiet smile, and could not believe that she had deceived him, yet he still remained uneasy.

Only when he was back in Abbott's office did he realise that he had seen nothing of Malone.

Then he told Abbott about Mortimer Oliphant.

Chapter 20

JANET DELIVERS NEWS OF IMPORTANCE

"What do you suggest we do, West?" asked Abbott.

The question was typical of the change in the man; at another time he would have given instructions and not listened to any argument. He had the reputation of being quite the most self-sufficient officer at the Yard. Now he seemed sincere as he waited for Roger to reply. It was eleven o'clock; they could hear the sonorous notes of Big Ben.

"We-ell," said Roger, "I don't think we should act too quickly, do you?" Abbott shook his head. "We've this list of names to investigate and when we've interviewed each man we should have a better idea of what it's all about."

Abbott looked surprised.

"The disposal of looted goods, surely?"

"The looting took place a long time ago," Roger reminded him.

"So you think there's something else?"

"Yes. It could be Black Market, ordinary theft, smuggling—" Roger shrugged his shoulders. "Theorising isn't going to help much, but I can't believe it's only looting. Pickerell wouldn't keep tablets of cyanide of potassium in his desk and probably in his pocket because he was afraid of being picked up for trafficking in looted goods."

"No," admitted Abbott, "I had missed that."

"And I think it knocks out the more straightforward crimes," Roger went on. "It could be espionage very carefully hidden, and yet I'm inclined to doubt that."

"You've no hard and fast ideas?"

"None," admitted Roger; "all I know is that it's something of exceptional size. Malone's gang, Oliphant, the Society – suggesting something which has been working for nearly three years – the murder of Joe Leech and, probably, that of Mrs. Cox – add those things together and you have a formidable business, which no ordinary motive will account for."

Abbott pressed the tops of his thin fingers together, admitting: "I am inclined to agree."

"And, of course, the Society is of primary importance," Roger said. "I wish I were more sure of Mrs. Cartier. She's given me an uneasy feeling that she hasn't acted for the best of motives. Perhaps she got in touch with me for some deep reason of her own and she hasn't told me anything like all the truth. You've checked up on her and her husband, of course?"

"Yes," said Abbott. He pushed a file across to Roger and sat back. "Read the reports – there's no hurry," he said.

The office, on the third floor of the Yard, was very quiet as Roger read through the report on Mrs. Cartier. She was of French birth but had become

a naturalised Englishwoman in 1936 – the year before her marriage to Sylvester Cartier. Daughter of a wealthy Lyons merchant, she had been educated in England for several years. She had been one of the first to offer hospitality to Frenchmen who had come from France before the 1940 *débâcle* and her interest in her native country had, it appeared, always remained strong. According to the report, she had first thought of the Society of European Relief when she had been approached by some Frenchmen of the professional classes who had been unable to find their niche in England or with the Free French authorities. There were many cases of hardship. She had helped them and then extended her activities. The Society had been in being for a little more than a year and it had a great deal in its favour. Wealthy Frenchmen in England and wealthy Francophiles had contributed towards the funds. Apparently Mrs. Cartier did most of the canvassing for money herself, and there was nothing surprising in the fact that she obtained good results – most men would have found the way from their hearts to their pockets after a visit from Mrs. Sylvester Cartier!

There was nothing beyond that and the fact that she had married Sylvester Cartier in 1937.

Another report, on her husband, was much more brief. Cartier had inherited a large fortune from his father – Roger suddenly realised why the name was so familiar. *Cartier's Food Products,* of course! They were known everywhere – the name was almost as familiar as that of Heinz, Chef Brand and a dozen others. He felt annoyed with himself for having missed it.

Educated at Eton and Balliol, a dilettante, a collector of *objets d'art* and antique furniture, Cartier appeared to have lived a life of leisured ease. He was on the director's board of *Cartier's Food Products* but apparently took little active interest in the company's affairs. He had been prominent in polo circles, had travelled widely, had a widely renowned library, dabbled in philately, was a member of three exclusive clubs. 'Correct' was the word to apply to Sylvester Cartier; no man's record could have been more in keeping with his elegant appearance. There was a note saying that he had been rejected by the Services because of evidence of valvular disease of the heart. Before the war, he had always wintered in France. He had a house at Weybridge – Roger remembered seeing that in the telephone directory – as well as a flat in London under his wife's name and a large country house in Dorset.

Roger finished and looked up, ruefully.

"There isn't much to glean from those, is there?" he said.

"Not a great deal about either of them," said Abbott. "What isn't in the report is that he always mildly disapproved of his wife's activities."

Roger shrugged. "He would probably think that waging the war was the job of the common people."

"I think you're right," Abbott said, "but he is not alone in that."

"Who are the family solicitors?" asked Roger.

Abbott smiled bleakly. "Not Oliphant! Rogerson, Keene, Keene and Rogerson, of Gray's Inn Fields. Quite irreproachable."

"Yes!" Roger was crisp, he stood up and began to pace the office. "They're both so irreproachable that it seems almost too good to be true and yet, I can't help feeling that I am spreading suspicions too widely. She might have meant everything she said, and if Malone had the slightest suspicion that she was one of his employers, he certainly wouldn't have treated her so roughly. I think we'd better concentrate on the list of names and addresses, don't you?"

"Yes," said Abbott, briefly, "especially Oliphant."

Roger said: "Will you leave him to me?"

"To you?" asked Abbott, slowly, and then more briskly. "Yes, I think that's wise, West. You won't encourage Lessing or this friend of Miss Randall's to do too much off their own bat, will you?"

Roger smiled. "They'll be good!"

He left the Yard soon afterwards, wishing that he had his own car with him, and decided that he would go to Bell Street and get it out of the garage, first thing in the morning – he could use it now, although while under suspension he could not have done. He heard Big Ben strike midnight. The moon was bright and shimmered on the water, it threw the clock and the Houses of Parliament into soft relief. The scene was exactly the same as when he had left the night before, when he had been far less troubled than he was now.

Lois – Mrs. Cartier – Oliphant – the grim scene beneath the floorboards at the New Street house, all harassed him. Twice as he walked towards Parliament Street, he turned abruptly at the sound of footsteps behind him. Once a soldier passed, another time a woman hurried furtively onwards. He had thought of Malone on both occasions – Malone was far too much on his mind. Two taxis passed him but were occupied. It would not take him twenty minutes to walk to the Legge Hotel, yet the fact that he could not get a cab annoyed him, and he thought longingly of his car. There was a garage at the hotel; it might be a good idea to go to Chelsea and then drive to Buckingham Palace Gate. That was absurd, he told himself, he would have to get a cab in order to reach Chelsea. He—

That taxi driver!

He had telephoned the house several times, but Morgan's man, tired of his vigil, had nothing to report. He had asked Cornish, earlier in the day, to try to trace the man – no news meant that Cornish had failed. He had learned the man's name – Dixon. Dixon had followed Cartier's Daimler; the fact that he had not returned was peculiar, to say the least of it.

"Oh, he phoned up and found no one in and gave it up as a bad job,' Roger thought testily.

Eventually he had to walk to the hotel.

He told the others what had happened but remained preoccupied. There was no answer when he called Bell Street, but just before he went to bed the telephone rang. It was Cornish in an apologetic frame of mind. He was at the Yard and knew that Roger had been there until midnight, so he hoped he hadn't brought him out of bed.

“Oh, no,” said Roger. “Have you found that cabby for me?”

“You mean Dixon?” said Cornish. “No, I haven’t, Roger. In fact, I meant to tell you earlier in the day that I was put on to another job and couldn’t follow it up myself. But there is one peculiar thing—”

“Yes?” asked Roger.

“He hasn’t been to his home since yesterday morning,” Cornish said.

“Hasn’t he, by Jove!”

“No.” Cornish dismissed the subject and went on: “I’ve been with Smith of AZ Division most of the day, Roger, trying to find Malone and Pickerell. I thought you ought to know that we haven’t had any luck. Malone’s reputation is worse than I thought it was. Er—I should keep my eyes open, if I were you.”

“I’ve just about sized him up,” Roger said.

“I thought you would have done! How are things?”

“I suppose I shouldn’t grumble,” Roger said.

Cornish rang off and Roger returned to the lounge, which was virtually reserved for them after ten o’clock at night. He stood in front of the fireplace with his hands deep in his trousers pockets. Mark contemplated him with a frown of concentration on his forehead. Janet had gone to bed and Tennant was pretending to be immersed in an evening paper.

Roger looked at him, frowning, then shrugged.

“Do you feel tired?” he asked.

“Who me?” Tennant dropped the paper and jumped up. “Great Scott, no!”

“Who, me?” asked Mark, forlornly.

“Both of you,” said Roger. “I think we’d better keep an eye on Oliphant’s house. Do you know where it is, Mark?”

“Yes, he’s in Cheyne Walk, just round the corner from a flat I used to have,” said Mark, promptly. “Any instructions?”

“Just keep a lonely vigil,” Roger said with a grin.

Both of the others seemed glad of the opportunity, but when they had gone Roger wondered whether it were wise. Abbott had been generous when he had asked to be allowed to handle Oliphant, but it might have been better to have put Yard men to watch him. Roger’s objection to that was that Oliphant would probably recognise a Yard man at sight and thereby realise that he was under suspicion. It was not time to scare him.

Roger went to bed; Janet, now that Lois had gone, was less on edge and she looked very tired and spoke sleepily from the pillows.

“Back home tomorrow,” she said; “we needn’t stay here now, darling, need we?”

“No,” said Roger, in some surprise; he had not thought of that. He smiled to himself, but he was a long time getting to sleep. The problems weighed heavily on him, questions confronted him on all sides. No matter where he looked he saw reason for suspicion and disquiet; most of all, the uncertainty about the real nature of the crime worried him.

He went to sleep at last.

A maid brought tea at eight o’clock. The sun shone through the net

curtains at the window and made even the grey slate roofs of adjoining buildings look bright and cheerful. Downstairs, the B.B.C. announcer reading the news had cheerful things to say.

Janet was fresh-eyed as she sat up in bed, but when she got up she felt dizzy and sat down again abruptly. Startled, Roger said: “Are you all right?”

“Er—yes,” said Janet. “I—” she hesitated. She was smiling, although she looked pale, the change in her since she had got out of bed was astonishing. Roger stared at her, puzzled. “Darling,” she said in an unsteady voice, “sometimes you’re as blind as a bat!”

“Oh,” said Roger, blankly, “am I?”

“Yes,” Janet said and added quickly: “I’ve suspected it for some time but I wanted to be really sure, darling. I *was* sure on my birthday and I was going to tell you after we’d seen *Arsenic and Old Lace*. But I couldn’t worry you after Abbott came.”

“What *are* you talking about?” demanded Roger, completely mystified.

Janet’s eyes were very soft. “Darling,” she said, “doesn’t morning sickness mean anything to you?”

“Morning—” he began, and then his expression altered, he stared incredulously, started to speak but stopped, tongue-tied. He moved forward and looked down at her as she stared at him, smiling. He gasped: “No! No, darling, not—””Well,” said Janet, “it’s two years since we were married, or had you forgotten?” She laughed. “What shall we call him, if it’s a boy?”

Roger felt like a man in a dream.

He should have realised it for several days past, or at least suspected it. Everything which had puzzled him was explained, her excitability and quick changes of mood, the ease of her tears, her occasional moments of acerbity.

His first reaction was of delight tinged with anxieties about the little luxuries that he would not be able to provide because of the war. A more urgent matter was the possibility that in his amazement he had made her think that he was lukewarm about it. Had he been sufficiently enthusiastic? Or had he depressed her?

He had left her to do the packing while he went on to open the house, to get the car out and to get in touch with Mark before going to the Yard. He had only vaguely outlined his own programme and he hardly gave a thought to Malone and Oliphant. His mind could not grapple with those problems as well as digest Janet’s news. He travelled by taxi and now and again caught himself grinning inanely; when he did so he closed his mouth firmly. Once, when he lit a cigarette, he began to grin so widely that it dropped from his lips. He smothered an exclamation of annoyance, then surrendered himself for five minutes in an orgy of self-congratulation. Only when they were passing the Chelsea Town Hall did he pull himself together.

It would be easier to make a detour and drive along the Embankment where he expected to find either Tennant or Mark – Cheyne Walk, where Oliphant had a small, charming, modern house, ran on to the Embankment. He gave instructions to the driver and then, sitting with his legs crossed on one of the tip-up seats and staring moodily about him, he saw young

Tennant. He wondered what had possessed him to give a job which required an expert to Lois's *fiancé,* and he was relieved that Mark must be somewhere in the offing.

Tennant started when his shadow loomed over him and looked more cheerful when he saw who it was. Roger had left the taxi a few yards farther along.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said the tousled young man. "I thought it was another policeman – I've been asked what I'm doing here twice already!"

Roger smiled and Tennant went on: "What are *you* so pleased about?"

"Oh, I'm not pleased," said Roger, hastily. "Where's Mark?"

"He's at the other end of the street," Tennant said.

"Has anything happened?"

"No – no one's gone in or out of the place."

"They will," said Roger, firmly, then added: "It's a tiresome business, I know, but don't get impatient. This is what you worried me for, after all!"

"I didn't think a policeman's job was so dull!"

"Dull?" queried Roger. "I wonder? Not such high pressure as an unarmed combat drill room, I suppose, but don't forget Mr. Malone! Tell Mark I'll have you both relieved at half past ten, will you? And then perhaps you'll come to my house and sleep there?"

"Well – if it's all right with you, it wouldn't be a bad idea," said Tennant, looking a little sheepish.

More subdued, Roger returned to his taxi, but his good spirits gradually gained the ascendency. Nothing could go wrong on such a morning. It was a day, in fact, when the whole business would probably resolve itself and he could settle down to routine, the comfortable job of oiling the machine of the law. Big cases were all right up to a point, but there could be too much of a good thing.

Near Cheyne Walk, he saw a man who was vaguely familiar but he thought little of him.

He paid off the cabby outside his house and hurried along the path, whistling to himself. He opened the front door, stepped through and closed it, then frowned, because the house was in darkness. Then he remembered Morgan's man – he had probably blacked out before he had left the night before. He groped for the hall switch and pressed it down; still there was no light.

"Confound it, the bulb's gone!" said Roger. He went forward a step and put his hand inside the lounge door, pressing that switch down. This time the light made him narrow his eyes, and blinded him with its glare. Then his features stiffened and he stared about him in growing stupefaction.

Nothing was in order.

Against the wall, the piano was taken in pieces, gaping open, every string broken and hanging loose. The carpet was slashed across and left in little strips. An armchair had not only been ripped open but the wooden framework had been chopped to pieces. Everything breakable was broken, everything tearable was torn, pictures were down, the wall-paper was

covered with great daubs of red paint. It was a scene of such devastation that he could not at first realise its significance.

Then Malone spoke from behind him.

“How do you like it, copper? And what do you know?”

Chapter 21

TENNANT LOSES HIS TEMPER

Roger stared at the man.

Malone wore a suit of blue that was bordering on heliotrope, his Marcel waves were dressed with great precision and the grease from his hair made his forehead glisten. He stood with his hands in his pockets and the winged shoulders of his coat were so wide that they nearly touched the door posts on either side. His thin red lips were set in a sneer which he doubtless considered intimidating.

Roger saw all that vaguely.

Far more vivid in his mind's eye was Janet – a composite picture of her gaiety that morning, her joy, the happiness with which she looked forward to coming home, and an imaginary picture of her when she saw the chaos in the lounge. He wondered whether the other rooms had been wrecked; Malone had probably made a thorough job of it.

"Keeping your mouth shut won't help you," said Malone.

A wave of cold anger passed through Roger, visible in his expression. The sneer faded from Malone's face and was replaced by a wary look – the pinched expression at Roger's white lips and nostrils caused that.

"Listen—" began Malone.

Roger said: "Malone, I charge you with causing wilful bodily harm to a number of persons, with conspiring to defraud, with theft and looting. I arrest you in the name of the law and anything you say may be used in evidence. Do you hear me?"

Malone said: "You're crazy!"

"You're under arrest," Roger said, "anything you do now will be an attempt to resist arrest. I don't know whether we can get you for murder, Malone, but even if we can't, be very careful. Next to murder, violence from now on will be the most serious charge on the calendar."

"You're off your nut," Malone said, his wary expression even more evident. "You can't do a thing, West, and I want—"

"You poor fool!" said Roger, scathingly. "You really think you can get away with it? Every policeman in this country is after you and you haven't a chance, you haven't even a hope of keeping away from them for the rest of the day. Whatever you do will only make it worse for yourself. If you submit now and make a statement, you might get lenient treatment. It's your only real hope."

"Shut your trap!" snapped Malone, "I didn't come here to listen to tall words from you, West. I came—"

"I'm not interested in why you came," said Roger. "I've told you the truth and if you like to play the fool, that's up to you. I don't know how many men you've got with you—"

“I brought plenty,” Malone said, his eyes narrowed until they looked like shining slits. “Quit the spieling, West. No one can touch me, I’m too fly. How much do you know?”

“Just as much as everyone at the Yard knows,” Roger said, to discourage Malone from thinking that if he were silenced the danger was past. “We’ll be moving later in the day.”

Malone said thinly: “West, I reckon your wife will be coming here soon. Once before, I took her away to warn you what would happen if you stuck your head out too far. Now it’s coming. If you don’t talk, I’ll deal with her different.” He kept his hands in his pockets, where Roger suspected that he had a knife, perhaps a gun. Mention of Janet brought a revival of the cold fury; it made him tremble from head to foot and he had to fight against throwing himself at the gangster – the one fatal thing to do. “You saw me deal with that Cartier dame,” Malone continued, “that was nothing to what I’ll do to your wife. Open up, West, what do you know?”

“Why Cox killed his wife,” said Roger, drawing a bow at venture, “and—”

Malone moved.

His trick of ending immobility in a sudden cyclonic movement succeeded in taking Roger by surprise. He backed away but caught his foot against a part of the broken chair and staggered against the mantelpiece. Malone struck him with the flat of his hand. It did not account for the sharp, stinging pain in Roger’s cheek nor the warm trickle of blood. He saw the man’s hand in front of him, a razor blade held between the middle and index fingers. He knew that Malone would gladly batter him as he had the room; yet he was less afraid than angry.

“That’s just a little idea of what’s coming to you,” Malon said, thinly. “Did the Randall dame talk?”

“She didn’t need to,” said Roger.

“That’s a lie. Did she talk?”

Roger said: “I’ve warned you, Malone, and you’ll get worse after this. If you’ve got any sense, go away.”

Malone sneered. “Talk! I’ve heard busies before. Talk, that’s about all they can do. If you caught me you couldn’t keep me.” He raised his arm threateningly. By a sleight of hand he moved the blade so that it was held between the tips of his fingers. He made a sweeping movement and the blade passed within an inch of Roger’s eyes. For the first time Roger felt only fear, a dread of what would have happened had the man let it touch his eyes.

“I’ll give you two minutes,” Malone said, “to—”

He broke off abruptly. From outside there came a shrill whistle, similar to the one that Roger had heard at Mrs. Cartier’s flat and that Mark had heard in the Saucy Sue. Malone stiffened and half turned his head. Roger kicked at him, aiming for his groin. He caught the man’s thigh and Malone lost his balance, just as two of the gang came into the room.

They ignored him as Malone, recovering his balance, said: “Who is it?”

“Lessing,” a rat-faced man said, “and the yob with the curly hair.”

Malone's eyes narrowed. "Tennant, huh? I've been wanting to talk with that guy. How far away?"

"The end of the street," said the rat-faced man.

"Walking?"

"Yeah."

Roger wondered: 'What's brought them?' Then, in a panic, he thought that they must not come in the way he had, although he heard the front door close as if Malone believed that it would be safe to play the same trick twice. He did not look at Roger but one of his companions stayed close to him; he had a knuckle-duster in his hand, an ugly, spiked weapon which would tear a man's face to pieces.

"Don't even squeak," Malone flung at Roger, savagely.

Footsteps sounded on the pavement and then the gravel drive. There was a pause and a heavy knock at the front door. Malone did not move except to put out a hand towards the light switch as if he were going to plunge the room in darkness. If he did—

The man with the knuckle-duster moved swiftly, caught Roger's right wrist, and twisted his arm behind his back. Whoever was outside knocked again; then Mark called: "Anyone at home?" There was a pause, then a key scraped in the lock – Mark had a key to the house.

Malone flicked his finger; the light went out.

"What the—" began Mark, as if startled by the darkness.

Actually it was broken by light streaming in from the open front door. "Roger!" Mark called. "Are you in?"

The pressure at Roger's wrist increased and he felt the scraping of the knuckle-duster on his cheeks. The veins swelled up in his neck and on his forehead, his breathing was heavy. He knew exactly what would happen if he called out. Damn it, he must call! He opened his lips—

Malone switched on the light. Mark gasped. Roger saw two men standing in the hall and guessed that one of them was showing a gun. Malone stepped into the hall with the sliding, swaggering gait which characterised him.

"Come right in, Lessing," he said; "you're welcome." He grinned, mirthlessly. "Where's Tennant?"

"I—" began Mark.

"Here's Tennant!" a man said – it was Tennant himself.

There was a flurry of movement and a shadow which loomed in the hall. It happened so suddenly that Roger felt his captor relax. He took the opportunity and wrenched his wrist away, back-heeled and caught the man's shin. Two men crashed down in the hall, carried to the floor by Bill Tennant, who had leapt past Mark and sailed through the air. He did not fall as the two men went down but landed on his feet, crouching, and looked at Malone and the other man. Malone held a knife in his hand now, not satisfied with the razor blades. There was a split second of silence, a hush while the two men weighed each other up. Malone was crouching low, and Tennant standing upright with his hands a little way in front of him. The men on the floor began to move, recovering from their shock.

Roger took a step forward.

Tennant jumped, feet foremost. His heels landed on Malone's stomach, and Malone's hand, holding the knife, swept round aimlessly. There was a squelching sound as Tennant's feet sank into him and he fell backward, cracking his head against the floor. The man whom Roger had kicked drew back his fist with the knuckle-duster ready, but Tennant came on, keeping his balance by some miracle. He gripped the wrist which held the knuckleduster, and Malone's man gasped and was thrown against the wall with a thud which shook the house. Malone, scrambling to his feet and with fight left in him, was shouting for help; but no one came.

Tennant turned on him and laughed into his face.

"This is what you hand out, Malone," he said. He struck the man with great power, and Malone toppled backwards. "That," Tennant said, "is for Lois, and what about some for Mrs. Cartier?" He bent down and yanked Malone to his feet.

There were men's voices, heavy footsteps and the sound of scuffling in the kitchen. Dazedly, Roger wondered who else had come. Mark was standing just in sight, with a gun in his hand; the two men whom Tennant had first attacked were backing towards the stairs. A familiar voice called: "Is West all right, Lessing?" It was Cornish.

"Yes," Mark called.

"Mister Malone," said Tennant, softly, "I never did like you." The man was helpless, hardly able to stand on his feet, but Tennant lifted him by the waist and flung him against the wall. There was a glitter in his eyes and his lips were curled back; unless he were stopped he would do murder.

Then Cornish and two or three plain-clothes men came in with a rush. Tennant drew back, dropping his hands. Roger could not look at Cornish, only at Tennant, to see the way he relaxed, the sudden fading of the glitter in his eyes, and the half-ashamed smile which suddenly curved his lips.

"It looks as if I lost my temper," he said, naively.

"Temper!" gasped Cornish.

Roger drew a deep breath. "Look here, what brought you?" he demanded; he wanted to understand, everything had happened too quickly for him. "How did you know—"

Mark turned, smiling. Police had taken over the two men he had been covering. He sauntered into the room, looking thoroughly pleased with himself.

"Malone sent one of his men to see Oliphant," he said. "I recognised him from the Saucy Sue and we had a little talk with him on the Embankment – Tennant didn't take long to make him open his mouth! He said Malone was waiting here for you or Janet, so I phoned the Yard – and here ends one lesson!"

"You see, it was simple," said Tennant, sheepishly. He looked into Malone's face – the man was barely conscious. "I hope I haven't killed him," he said. "I've been giving lessons for two years and as I haven't met a Hun yet, I thought Malone would do for some real practice!" He put his hands

into his pockets and then, for the first time, seemed to notice the chaos of the room. “By George!” he exclaimed. “What a mess!” Then his eyes widened and he stared at Roger.” What have you done to your face?”

Roger fingered his slashed cheek, surprised to find the blood on his fingers. He shrugged. “I’d better wash it off,” he said, and went to the bathroom.

It was all too confusing for him to understand, the speed of events had been too great for him; but as he dabbed at his cheek which kept bleeding, and while Mark began to dress the cut, things began to take on a proper perspective. ‘Simple’ was the operative word. He remembered seeing the vaguely familiar man near the Embankment and remembered that he had been at the Cartier’s flat, but for once, Mark had had the better memory for faces. By sending Mark and Tennant to Oliphant he had done the right thing, after all. No one at the Yard would have recognised the messenger.

“Feeling better?” Mark asked, when sticking plaster was in position over a strip of lint.

“Er—I’m all right,” Roger said. “So we’ve got Malone.”

Mark ignored the platitude.

“And most of his men,” he said, “but – what utter swine! I—what’s the matter? Roger, what—”

“The other rooms!” snapped Roger.

Two minutes later, he had been in every room in the house and felt better, for only the lounge had been touched. He even found himself wondering whether it would be possible to make Janet come in the back way so that she would not get the full force of the shock that the lounge would be bound to give her. He looked at Mark, and explained what had suddenly occupied him; at that moment a Black Maria drew up outside. There was a crowd of people waiting and staring, a few dots at the heels of the crowd, some schoolboys and two or three uniformed men. Only the dogs gave voice as the men of Masher Malone’s party were taken to the police van, handcuffed together in twos. Malone, only just able to stagger, went last. Two plain-clothes men climbed in, the driver started the engine and the van moved off.

“Well?” Mark said to Roger and Cornish, who had remained behind. “What now?”

“Any more for any more?” grinned Tennant.

“You’ve had enough for one day,” Mark assured him severely; “don’t ever take a dislike to me, will you?”

“That depends,” grinned Tennant. “Well, what *are* you going to do next, Roger?”

“Who did you leave to watch Oliphant?” Roger demanded.

“Now come off it,” said Mark; “we had our work cut out to rescue you from a dreadful fate, we had to take a chance somewhere.” Mark looked tired but his spirit was willing, for he said: “Shall we go back there?”

Roger said: “No-o.” He looked at the silent, rather subdued, Cornish and there was a faint smile on his face. Cornish probably felt grieved because he

had missed the fight. “It’s time I pretended to be a policeman and worked by regulation, I think.”

“You mean – interview Oliphant?” Mark asked.

“Yes. I’d better have a word with Abbott first,” said Roger. He went to the telephone but it was cut; he realised that he should have expected it to be, for had Malone been able to telephone the solicitor he would not have sent a man. On such small mistakes a great deal depended, Roger thought, inanely. “Oh, well, I’d better go to see Abbott,” Roger said: “but – Mark, will you stay up until Janet arrives?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Thanks,” said Roger. “I think I’ll get the car out,” he went on; “you’d better stay around for a bit. Corny, in case anything else blows up – they seem quite determined to let it all happen here.”

“All right,” said Cornish.

He walked through to the back door. The police had forced a window but Cornish had entered using the back door key which had been replaced in the tool shed by Morgan’s man. There were signs of the struggle when the police had first entered but the kitchen looked in perfect order compared with the lounge. Roger scowled as he took out his keys, yet realised he had a great deal to be thankful for; when he thought of Malone he touched his cheek.

A single slip had finished Malone. It was difficult to believe that the man was on his way to the police cells, that the striking arm of the Pickerell-Oliphant organisation had been paralysed

The quicker he interviewed Malone the better; not that he expected the man to squeal, although probably some of his gang would. Roger forgot his anxieties and the disappointments awaiting Janet in a sudden burst of confidence. If anything was puzzling him at the moment he opened the doors of the garage, it was that Tennant had behaved in a peculiar way, to say the least. He had appeared to go for Malone as if he thoroughly enjoyed it, his temper had dissipated with remarkable facility. Perhaps Lois had told him more about Malone.

“What the—” gasped Roger.

The garage doors were wide open when he looked inside. His car was there, bonnet towards him. Sitting at the wheel, eyes wide open and mouth hidden by a scarf tied very tightly, sat a man with a peaked cap pushed to the back of his head, and with his hands tied to the steering wheel.

Chapter 22

INTERVIEW WITH CHATWORTH

It was Dixon, the taxi-driver.

He could not speak even when Roger removed the scarf, and his mouth would hardly close; great red ridges showed on either side. His hands were so stiff that Roger had to prise them from the steering wheel. By then he had called for help, and Mark and Cornish, Tennant and two other policemen, were standing outside the garage.

Roger helped the man from the car; without his support Dixon would have fallen.

They carried him into the house, put him on a settee, then began to massage his lips and legs and wrists. Mark made some strong tea, put plenty of sugar in a cup, and spoon fed the man. The tension, which had relaxed after the disappearance of the Black Maria, was more acute than ever. Roger was desperately anxious to find out what had happened to Dixon, and who had brought the man here. He did not doubt that Dixon could give important information.

It was half an hour before the man could speak and then only in a voice a little above a whisper. Time and time again in the half-hour, Roger had remembered him at the wheel of his cab, starting in the wake of Cartier's Daimler.

The story quickened with excitement although it took twenty minutes in the telling.

Dixon had followed the Daimler to Bonnock House. Soon after he had parked his cab at the end of the road, another had arrived, bearing Mrs. Sylvester Cartier. With her had been a man whom the taxi-driver knew by sight because he had worked a great deal in the East End and had often been to the Old Bailey for a free entertainment. The man's name, he said, was Oliphant.

"Oliphant!" Roger exclaimed.

"Sure – an' the lady." Dixon licked his lips, it was still an effort for him to speak. "Maybe I got too curious, mister; I went too close. I was hanging around and Malone arrived – you know Malone? He's poison, he—"

"He's at Cannon Row," Roger said.

Dixon's eyes glittered. "I wish I could 'ave 'ad a go at 'im first, the—" he broke off, gulped again and licked his lips painfully. "Okay, then, I just stayed around. Malone was watching. The toff who had been with the lady came out and got into the Daimler again and I started to follow but before I got far Malone came on the running board. Know 'Ampstead 'Eath, mister? Well, it's lonely enough an' I couldn't do a thing about it. There was four of them. They—they—" his voice was hoarse with anger, "they tied me up an' put me at the back o' me own cab an' drove it 'ere."

Roger said: “And you’ve been here ever since?”

“Every ruddy minnit,” said Dixon; “they never even give me a drink o’ water. They tied me ‘ere an’ told me I’d be lucky if anyone came before I was stiff.” He gulped. “I couldn’t even get to the ‘orn, it was just in front o’ me but I couldn’t move me ‘ead, Guv’nor. Wouldn’t I like—”

“Did they talk much?” Roger asked.

“Talk – they never did nothing else!” said Dixon. “They arst me ‘ow long I’d been a squealer, me – me a perishing nose! I arst yer! They wanted to know if I’d been told to watch the lady an’ whether you had said anything about her, I said you said I was to watch the toff, Guv’nor. I didn’t see no sense in giving them what they perishin’ well wanted.”

“Good man!” said Roger, warmly.

“That tickled Malone,” Dixon said, “’e laughed as if it was the best joke in the world, Guv’nor – but I ‘ad the laugh, ‘cos ‘e didn’t know you was really after the dame.”

“And that’s the lot?” asked Roger.

“It seems plenty to me,” said Dixon, putting a hand to his eyes. “Strewth, if I don’t get some shut-eye soon I shall drop dead, that’s what I shall do, drop dead!”

“We’d better get you home,” Roger said.

“Guv’nor, if you’ve got a bed ‘ere—”

Roger said: “Yes, of course.” He left Mark and Tennant to put the man to bed, smiled crookedly at the thought of Janet’s homecoming, then drove in his own car to the Yard. There seemed nothing to do but detain Mrs. Cartier and Oliphant and hope that one or the other would make a full statement. The woman might break down. There were some things which continued to puzzle him – if Malone had known that the woman was implicated when Dixon had arrived, he must have known later that evening – yet there had been nothing phoney about the way he had assaulted her.

“To make me jump to the wrong conclusion,” Roger said aloud; “it couldn’t mean anything else.”

He reached the Yard and immediately gave instructions for Mrs. Cartier and Oliphant to be shadowed. He learned from Eddie Day that Abbott had put a man on Oliphant after all; rueful but relieved, Roger reflected that Abbott was still capable of being two-faced. Until he saw Abbott, he thought that Mrs. Cartier had no watcher but he was wrong. The Superintendent was apologetic; Chatworth had ordered him to have Oliphant watched, as well as Mrs. Cartier; the A.C. had not been prepared to leave it to Roger. And: “I think he was right, West,” Abbott said.

“So do I,” admitted Roger. “There’s no sign of Pickerell?”

“No.”

“You’ve heard about Malone, of course?”

“I’ve just come from him,” said Abbott; “he will not talk – but then, he is hardly in a condition to talk, he will be in hospital for several days. Who dealt with him? Was it Cornish?”

Roger smiled. “No. There was a bit of a scrap, I can’t say who hit who.”

He expected to be pressed on the point, but a buzzer rang on Abbott's desk and the Superintendent stood up quickly.

"That's Sir Guy," he said. "I told him you had arrived and he promised to ring for us as soon as he was ready." He led the way up to Chatworth's office and they went in immediately, finding Chatworth sitting at his tidy, shining desk. His fringe of greying hair was sticking out raffishly from his head, as if he had been trying to run his fingers through it. He looked at Roger with a faint smile.

"You're having quite a week, aren't you, West?"

Roger grimaced. "Yes, aren't I?"

"Still, it looks as if the worst is over," said Chatworth. "Abbott's told you that we're watching *everyone*?" Roger nodded and Chatworth made no other reference to the countermanding of the permission to handle the Oliphant angle himself. "All the people whom the Randall girl named have been interviewed *except* Oliphant," he said; "we've been very busy all through the night, West."

"Good!" said Roger, smiling with genuine relief. He should have realised that the Yard would act swiftly and thoroughly. He had not yet got it out of his system that he was working this case on his own.

"And we have a very remarkable story," Chatworth said. "You haven't told him, Abbott?"

"No," said Abbott.

Roger stared. The A.C.'s eyes held a smile and he realised then that Abbott seemed very self-satisfied, even smug. It dawned upon him that they had discovered the motive behind it all; while he had been asleep and puzzling his mind for it, the Yard had found the truth. He felt a little foolish and yet greatly relieved.

"What is it, sir?" he asked.

Chatworth said: "It's a combination of things, West. First, many of the jewels which were looted during the blitz have not been disposed of. Pickerell sold items to some of the people to whom Miss Randall took the packages – she actually took the goods. There followed ordinary fencing, stealing of gems – always gems. Pickerell was the fence, working from Welbeck Street."

"Yes?" said Roger. "That was not all?" Everything in Chatworth's manner told him there was more to come.

Chatworth gave his smug smile.

"And then there was the *real* purpose of the Society of European Relief, West! Relief!" He threw back his head and uttered a short laugh. "Oh, it had its genuine side but the chief angle was *very* clever indeed, and they had a cool nerve. Jewels were brought in from the Continent. There's been smuggling, we've known that for some time. Some were dropped by parachute at appointed places and members of the Society collected them and brought them to Welbeck Street."

Roger thought: 'Smuggled sparklers, so that's it.' He felt annoyed with himself for being disappointed. It was a big enough conception and its

effrontery would take some beating, yet it lacked the proper finishing touch.

"Most of them came from Germany and Italy," Chatworth said, gently.

Roger stared. "Germany?"

"Ever heard of the fortunes which Goering, Goebbels, Himmler and the rest of them are supposed to have wafted away?" asked Chatworth. "Of course you have! But other well-placed Nazi officials and German industrialists weren't able to do it. They wanted to save something from the wreckage, so they put their money in jewels – many of them pillaged from the occupied countries – and they sent them over here. The Society of European Relief became an organisation"—Chatworth laboured over the words—"to help Nazis and Fascists who thought they had a chance of saving their skins and wanted a comfortable fortune handy for the time when things settled down again. Follow that, West? The Society of European Relief!" he added, scathingly.

Roger said, faintly: "What use would it be to them? If they were Nazis they would be up for trial on the War Guilt clauses."

"Yes, yes," said Chatworth, "these people weren't the real Nazi officials, they were lukewarm, party men, guilty as hades but likely to get away with it because they had never been important in the Party machine. They were afraid that red revolution would break out in Germany – as it probably will – and in Italy. Nowhere in Germany or Italy would be safe for their filthy lucre. They had visions of another financial collapse like there was after the last war. They wanted to be quite sure that they had something to fall back on, so they sent the jewels to England – with Nazi connivance, of course. The Italian end has been closed for some time, but the German one is still open. Satisfied, West? Is it big enough?"

"Ye-es," said Roger. He felt breathless. "The nerve of it!"

"Oh, yes," said Chatworth. "But think how clever it was, West – they actually had a genuine organisation ready for distributing the jewels, which were never allowed to remain in one place for long. Very pretty, isn't it? For every genuine applicant for relief there was one who was a party to this precious scheme. There were people with friends in Germany and Italy, prepared to help when Mrs. Cartier persuaded them – men who wouldn't touch the jewels for themselves but were prepared to hold them. I don't know what precious argument the woman puts up – she probably told a lot of them that they were jewels belonging to Nazi victims. There are some very big names on the list of patrons of the Society – oh, it will prove quite a scandal! Beginning to understand how important it was that you should not connect the murder of the woman Cox with this?"

Roger said: "Yes, but – it's doubtful whether I ever would have done."

"Oh, I don't know," said Chatworth; "you have ideas sometimes! I think Oliphant must have been afraid that you'd seen something. I've heard from some of the people concerned that they have been afraid of a raid for several months. They had the wind-up all right and"—he laughed—"Friday the 13th worried someone!"

Roger said: "Ye-es. It couldn't have been that alone. You've enough on

Mrs. Cartier and Oliphant to arrest them, of course?"

"We can pick them up when we want them," said Chatworth; "that's why I didn't leave Oliphant to you at first, I couldn't take any risks. But you can't say that I haven't been generous, West, I'm leaving him and Mrs. Cartier to you after all! Your job to charge them." He smiled. "Does that please you?"

Roger sat back in his chair, trying to assimilate all he had heard. The subtlety and simplicity of the plot was something to admire; he did admire it, even though reluctantly. Malone and the organisation built up during the days of 1940-1 had been harnessed with depressing efficiency to a chariot which would salvage the fortunes of some of the enemy. Mrs. Cartier, trading on her husband's social connections and her own beauty, had been a perfect intermediary. He wondered who had first thought of the Society and be remembered how she had talked to him when she had first told him of Lois and her conversation with Pickerell.

Suddenly, he said: "I think we'd be wise to defer arresting Mrs. Cartier, sir."

Chatworth stared, genuinely startled.

"Now, West—"

"Look here," said Roger with feeling, "she came to see me and first awoke my interest in the Society. Are you aware, sir, that if she hadn't come to pretend that she wanted my wife's help, I would probably never have gone to Welbeck Street? We might have traced Malone to Bonnock House, but even that's doubtful; it's the last place we'd have looked for him. We might, after a long time, have realised that the Society was up to no good, but I'm not at all sure. But for Mrs. Cartier we wouldn't have been able to make a move and I would still be under suspension."

"Now—" began Chatworth again.

"It is true, isn't it?" Roger insisted.

"Come, West, come! You're grown up!" Chatworth's sarcasm, as heavy as a spade, was telling. "She has been a very smart, clever woman, no doubt about that." He looked over the tops of his glasses. "Why, she even got five guineas out of me!" He hurried over that evil memory and went on, scowling: "Oh, yes, very clever. She told you some things and she meant to be sure that, whatever else, you would not suspect her."

Roger said: "I don't know, sir. I saw Malone strike her. I saw the way her head went from side to side. That wasn't faked – he hurt her. I know what power Malone can put into his blows," he added with feeling.

Abbott began to speak but stopped. Chatworth pursed his lips and waited for Roger to go on.

"I wasn't wholly sure that she told me everything," he admitted, "but I can't believe that she would have been fool enough to have given me quite such a direct hint if she were guilty. Then there are the dictaphone records. If you're asking me to believe that Malone went there to get one just to create effect and to distract attention from her – well, sir, I can't believe it."

"Oh," said Chatworth. "Well, what *do* you believe?"

Roger hesitated before he said: "We might not have got to the bottom of

it yet, sir. If – allowing it as an assumption, nothing else—"

"*Very* nice of you," said Chatworth, thinly.

'That's right, be clever,' thought Roger. Aloud, he said: "If she did lead me there and is a party to it, it would only be because the Society is no longer useful and that she has taken up the second line of defence – or the people who work with her have. On the other hand, if she were genuinely interested in the Society as a relief organisation and had reason to believe that it was being used for something else, the method she adopted might be explained."

"Astonishing!" Chatworth said. "I knew she was a lovely woman, but—"

Roger stood up abruptly, looking at the A.C., who had the grace to colour. As he stared at his superior, Roger was conscious of Abbott staring up at him. He sent a glance at the Superintendent's thin face, saw the expression, one almost of expectancy—was it *frightened* expectancy?—on it. He remembered everything from the beginning of the case and he was suddenly aware that one thing had been taken for granted.

His expression altered.

Abbott said: "What are you thinking, West?"

"Oh, I'm trying to imagine whether anyone else could be behind it," Roger said, and then ruefully: "After all, if you have the list of the supporters of the Society you've plenty to choose from, haven't you? We may only be at the fringe of the affair yet. Seriously, sir – I ask you to pull Oliphant in if you must, but leave Mrs. Cartier for the time being."

Chatworth pursed his lips, and said after a long pause: "I'll think about it, West. Have a couple of men ready to go with you to Chelsea, for Oliphant, in case we act at once. I'll call you in a few minutes."

"Very good, sir," said Roger, formally.

He wished he could hear what Abbott said to the A.C. as he went to his own office. It was empty, and he was glad that he could sit back at his desk and stare ahead of him without being harassed by curious officers. He hated the thought that had come to him, he wished that it had not. He saw the whole thing in a different perspective, something greater than a hoax, something even more serious than he had yet imagined. He saw what appeared to be the *only* effective way in which he could have served a useful purpose had the case been proved against him.

Supposing a man at the Yard *was* taking bribes?

Supposing the whole thing had been built up so that suspicion, which would be inevitable, had fallen on him, not on the real culprit.

Abbott?

Malone had said the Yard couldn't keep him if they got him. Was this confidence founded on the fact that he was sure of help from inside the Yard?

The telephone rang and he answered it quickly, surprised to hear Chatworth so soon on the line – he had not yet even detailed the sergeants. Then Eddie Day came in breezily, his prominent teeth bared in a smile of welcome.

“Eddie, get two sergeants here for me – I’ll be back soon,” Roger said. “I’m going to see the Old Man.”

Mention of Chatworth was quite enough to prevent Eddie from trying to delay him. He walked quickly along the corridor and up the stairs, entering on Chatworth’s gruff ‘come in.’

Abbott had gone.

“Close the door, West,” said Chatworth. “Sit down.” He linked his fingers together and placed his hands across his paunch and peered over his glasses. “Now, what’s on your mind?”

“I think I’ve told you ev—” Roger began.

“No you haven’t,” Chatworth barked. “Something is worrying you, I saw your change of expression. What is it?”

Reluctantly, Roger said: “Well, sir, I can’t understand why I was framed. The Oliphant business and the 13th might be enough and yet – oh, it doesn’t make sense! What would—”

“Ah!” said Chatworth. He leaned forward, pressing the backs of his hands against the side of the desk. “Does anything else puzzle you, West? Or have you allowed yourself to be dazzled by your change of fortunes and forgotten to think?”

“I don’t follow you,” Roger said, but then added sharply: “Do you mean – the manner of my suspension?” When Chatworth glared at him he remembered his anger at the methods adopted, the fact that he had been treated as if already condemned. He said slowly: “Look here, sir, is there unquestionable evidence of a leakage at the Yard?”

“Yes,” said Chatworth, and exhaled with a noise like a collapsing toy balloon.

Before Roger could speak, after the silence which followed, the telephone rang. Chatworth frowned, and lifted it promptly. His frown disappeared in an expression of amazement. He snapped: “Yes, I’ll come!” then banged the receiver down and jumped to his feet. “Come on, West,” he said. “Malone tried to break out of his cell, he got a key from somewhere.”

Roger exclaimed: “A key! So that—”

“Proves it, yes,” said Chatworth.

They found that a sergeant and three policemen at Cannon Row had managed to overpower Malone, after he had unlocked the door of his cell and, with a last furious burst of energy, had fought to escape. Of the evidence which Chatworth obtained, the important points were that Cornish had brought Malone and the others to Cannon Row and then gone on to the East End, that Malone had been visited by Abbott, alone, and later by Abbott and Tiny Martin.

With those things established and Malone on the way to hospital – it was amazing that he had had the strength for his effort after his severe battering – Chatworth and Roger returned to the A.C.’s office, facing the established fact of a renegade at the Yard and the need for prompt action.

Chapter 23

DISHONOUR AMONG POLICE

Chatworth began to speak swiftly but in a low voice. He had long suspected that information was being allowed to escape from the Yard. Two or three arrests of men wanted for various crimes – all in the East End – had been prevented because the suspects had been warned and had managed to escape; they were in hiding. After the first two – in the November of the previous year – he had kept a careful watch, and had given Abbott and Tiny Martin the task of trying to find the leakage. There had been other leakages, less serious but quite unmistakable. Raids on West End clubs had failed because the proprietors had been warned in advance. Two small fences had been able to get rid of stolen jewels before their premises were searched. As far as Roger and the rest of the Yard knew, these were incidentals, cases which had failed at the last moment – as many did, there was nothing unusual about it. Chatworth had drawn a line between them all, connecting them and growing more than ever certain that information was being sold.

Abbott had worked quietly. Malone's name had been heard more often and Roger's associated with it. Abbott had tried the obvious thing, and approached Leech.

"And from then on it appeared to be a clear-cut case against you," said Chatworth. "You know what happened after that. The dictaphone record proved that you were not the man. However, there is someone involved. Malone getting the key proves that beyond doubt. You suspect Abbott, don't you?"

"I couldn't go as far as that," said Roger, "but he has crossed my mind. He told me that he had seen Malone, and only a policeman could have given Malone the key. It wasn't necessarily Abbott, even if he is the obvious man to suspect – I don't trust the obvious, sir."

"Charitable of you," growled Chatworth. "Who else?"

"It could be Sergeant Martin, who is familiar with all that Abbott does – and he was at the cell. But – it needn't be either of them."

"You think it is, but you're trying to be fair," said Chatworth. "All right, West! However, Abbott was very anxious that you should arrest Mrs. Cartier immediately. He tried to persuade me to give those instructions, but your case for her was a strong one. She must be watched, but there is no need for immediate action. We've uncovered the main plot, we must find who is letting us down." The words sounded absurdly inadequate.

"Have you any course of action in mind, sir?" asked Roger.

"Yes. To use Oliphant as a bait. We won't go for him yet, but we'll broadcast the fact that it's only a matter of time before we do – I've given Abbott those instructions. If Oliphant remains where he is—" the A.C. shrugged. "It might be that whoever has been selling out thinks it's too

dangerous this time. On the other hand, he'll probably be warned, and if he tries to get away we can pick him up. We should be able to find out who's told him to make himself scarce."

"Ye-es," admitted Roger, frowning. "I don't like it, sir, but—"

Chatworth said: "Oh, I'm thoroughly enjoying myself!" He snapped his fingers in exasperation. "I know how you feel, West; I'm all at sixes and sevens myself. In a police force of some twenty thousand men there are bound to be some rogues, but I don't like to think that any of them reach a position of responsibility. There's another thing we have to admit – it has completely disrupted our organisation. I've never known so many things go awry at the same time – and what's the reason?" Chatworth answered himself, after a pause: "Because I haven't felt that I can wholly trust anyone."

Roger had a curious sensation – he felt sorry for the A.C. Of all the men he had imagined able to stand squarely on his own feet, Chatworth was the strongest. Now he was confessing that the situation had got beyond him. The vacillations of the official attitude suddenly became logical.

Roger smiled. "You know, sir, we aren't doing too badly! Malone and his mob under arrest, the Society fraud proved, most of the agents, guilty and innocent, known to us. At another time we'd be congratulating ourselves. Within forty-eight hours we should know whether Mrs. Cartier *is* the brains behind the scheme, or whether it's Oliphant or someone whom we don't yet know."

"Ye-es," said Chatworth, relaxing into a smile. "Comforting common sense, West, thank you!" He rubbed the side of his head. "Do you think it possible that whoever is giving information from here *is* the real leader? Is that in your mind?"

"No more than vaguely," Roger said.

Chatworth considered. "Fair enough," he conceded.

"Are you having any individuals in the force watched, sir?" Roger asked, studiously avoiding names.

"Difficult to set the police to catch the police," Chatworth said, "especially after our one complete failure. I shall leave it to you."

"With full authority?" Roger asked, quietly.

"With full authority to act," Chatworth said.

"Thank you, sir," said Roger, and found it difficult to conceal a smile of gratification.

"Except," said Chatworth, "you will tell no one here what you are doing. If you want anyone followed without his knowledge, whoever you use must believe that there is some danger for his quarry and that he's acting as a bodyguard – you can arrange that, of course?"

"Of course, sir," echoed Roger.

Ten minutes later he was sitting at his desk. No one else was in the office, and he was grinning much as he had done in the taxi.

The quick changes of mood which he had felt that day were natural enough. The latest development, grave though it was from the official point

of view, did not affect him personally. The *volte face* was remarkable – from being suspect Number One he had become the only man wholly in Chatworth's confidence. That, and Janet's news, offset the depressing effect of what had happened at Bell Street and the problems which remained unsolved.

The telephone rang. "Mrs. West is on the line, sir," the operator told him.

"Put her through," Roger said quickly. "Hallo . . . Jan, have—"

"I would like to ring Malone's neck!" said Janet, with deep feeling, "but I'm told that Bill Tennant didn't do a bad job! Darling, I"—her voice sounded bright—"wanted to tell you not to worry about the lounge, it—I mean, they have left us something and—well, it doesn't really matter all that much."

Roger said: "Bless you, my sweet!"

"I mean, don't brood about it," Janet said. "How are things going?"

"Not badly," said Roger, switching his mind with difficulty. "I—er—look here, ask Mark and Tennant to meet me at the Green Cat – Mark knows it – at half past two, will you? Unless they're both too tired, that is. I think I can find something for them to do."

"Mark's here," said Janet, "will you have a word with him? Mark!" she called and then Mark's voice sounded on the line.

Roger did not see Janet turn from the repaired telephone and look about the room, with tears in her eyes and her cheeks very pale. Roger had not seen her expression when she had arrived, nor watched her forcing back her tears when she saw the chaos. But Mark saw her as he spoke to Roger and he sounded rather subdued. Roger put it down to the fact that his friend was tired; he confirmed the arrangement to meet at the Green Cat, and rang off. He was smiling widely when the door opened and Eddie Day came in.

"Now what's the matter with you, Handsome?" demanded Eddie. "Strike me, you look as if you'd lost a tanner and found half a crown! Been promoted?" he added, almost anxiously.

Roger laughed. "No, Eddie, I won't be able to go any higher until I'm in the middle forties, if at all, so cast the green mote out of your eye!"

Eddie, jealous of his inspectorship, looked relieved.

"Things going all right, then?" he asked.

"Not badly at all," said Roger. "You haven't seen Abbott, have you?"

"Just come from him," said Eddie, frowning. "Cold fish all right, he tried to tick me off. Me! *He* doesn't look as if he's come into a fortune, if you ask me, he looks as if he's got something on his mind."

"Does he?" asked Roger, perfunctorily.

He made one or two phone calls, wishing Cornish were at the Yard. But the fair-haired Inspector was working in AZ – his old Division – which he knew thoroughly, trying to find out more about Malone and keeping an eye open for Pickerell. Pickerell, Mrs. Cartier and Oliphant, Roger thought, might give him the answer to the major problem – that of the renegade policeman.

"Seen Sloan?" asked Eddie Day, looking up from his desk.

"Sloan? No!" Roger was eager. "Is he back?"

"I saw him coming in, half an hour ago," Eddie said. "Looks as if he's been somewhere the sun shone – better weather than *we've* had."

Detective-Inspector William Sloan, until recently Sergeant Sloan and Roger's chief *aide,* was a tall, not bad-looking man, with mousy hair, a rather speculative expression in his brown eyes. Roger sent for him; Eddie went out and Sloan said that he had come back two days early because he had heard a rumour of Roger's trouble. He looked genuinely relieved at the present position.

"Oh, it passed," Roger said, "but the A.C. feels pretty sure that there is a leakage." He looked at Sloan evenly. The other did not answer, but after a pause he smiled faintly and nodded.

"What I want to do," said Roger, "is to make sure that no one has a crack at Abbott or Martin." He paused; he thought that Sloan was probably the only man at the Yard, Cornish possibly excepted, who would be able to read between his words. "They've been up to the neck in this business and they might be in danger, even though Malone's gone," he added. "But then, you don't know what's been happening?"

"I've heard all about it," said Sloan. "I've been in the canteen."

"Good! Take a couple of reliable men, will you, and guard Abbott and Martin with their lives!" Roger smiled. "Don't let Abbott know what you're doing, or he might get annoyed. It doesn't take much to upset him."

"I follow you," said Sloan, sombrely.

"You'll turn in the usual reports, of course," said Roger, "and phone me if there's anything urgent. Oliphant is suspect Number One at the moment – had you heard of that?"

"Everyone here seems to have heard," Sloan told him.

"Nice work," Roger said.

But he believed that it was a mistake and was glad it was Chatworth's responsibility, not his. If Oliphant were warned, anyone at the Yard might be responsible. Had only a limited number known of the solicitor's connection with the case, the issue would have been narrowed. Now it was done, he would have to make the best of it, but it made new difficulties.

In the course of the next hour, several reports were telephoned to him. The men watching Oliphant had nothing to report. The solicitor had not left his house but had been seen at the front window. He had had no callers. Mrs. Cartier was at her flat, but her husband had gone to the City and had last been seen entering the building which houses the head offices of the Cartier Food Product Company – it seemed likely that Cartier was taking one of his sporadic plunges into the affairs of the Company from which he obtained his wealth. There was no trace of Pickerell, but Cornish, telephoning personally, said that several more of Malone's men had been located and there were rumours that a man answering Pickerell's description had been seen in the East End the previous evening.

"Good man – go to it!" Roger said.

"Ought I to have a word with Abbott?" Cornish asked.

"Why not?" asked Roger, putting Cornish through.

He telephoned the letting office at Bonnock House, talked for some time, and, at half past twelve, he went down to the canteen, had a snack, and then left for Pep Morgan's office – he had telephoned to say that he would be there about one o'clock and asked for Pep's chief operatives to be present. Maude greeted him, with a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. She told him that she had been to see Pep that morning and that he was making a good recovery.

"I didn't think it would be too bad," said Roger. "Where are the men?"

Maude cocked her thumb over her shoulder, indicating Pep's private office.

The lanky Sam was propping himself up against the window, a stolid, chunky individual – the man who had been at Bell Street and who had left soon after dawn that day – was sitting on Morgan's desk. He swore that he had heard nothing of the taxi-driver's arrival in the garage; Dixon had been there before Pep's man had arrived on duty. The other men, middle-aged fellows with jaundiced looks in their eyes and the world-weariness which comes to men whose lives are bound up with the sordid business of domestic disruption, were sitting on upright chairs. All of them eyed Roger hopefully.

"Okay, Boss," Sam said, "shoot."

Roger smiled. "Look here," he said, "this is more official than it was before – I'm no longer the bad boy of the Yard. But I want some help."

"So you really admit there *are* detectives outside the Yard?" Sam said, admiringly. "You learn quick, Handsome!"

"I hope you will," Roger said.

He told them what he wanted. The Cartier *ménage,* the Society offices and Oliphant's house were all to be watched, but they were not to disclose their presence to any police who happened to be near the scenes. They were the second line of defence, he said – the police would be recognised by the crooks but they might not be. Since Malone's gang had been rounded up, they need not expect much in the way of violence, but he would expect precise reports as to who had gone into the buildings, and who had come out.

He thought Sam seemed disappointed, but the men went off cheerfully enough.

He telephoned the *Cry* and the *Echo* from Morgan's office, speaking to both Wray and Tamperly. He gave each a *resumé* of the developments and promised them further revelations later in the day. Both men worked for evening as well as daily papers in the same combine, and he said to each: "If you can get a paragraph in, hinting that there will be startling developments in the next twenty-four hours, it would help, but don't say that I'm cleared."

Each man agreed, in characteristic phraseology. Roger replaced the receiver and saw Maude looking up at him with her eyes narrowed.

"Have you got something, Handsome?" she demanded.

"Do you know," said Roger, "I wouldn't be surprised!"

He reached the Green Cat, a small restaurant off Piccadilly, at half past

two precisely; he had to wait for ten minutes before Mark and Tennant arrived by taxi. Mark showed signs of his all-night session more than Tennant, whose bright eyes suggested that he was not a stranger to such nights out. At a corner table, where they had coffee, Roger gave them an outline of the situation, naming Abbott and Tiny Martin. Neither of them seemed particularly shocked.

"I'm not surprised," Mark said.

"Where do we come in, Roger?" asked Tennant, eagerly.

Roger said: "I'm going to telephone Oliphant and tell him that Mrs. Cartier wants to see him at her flat, and telephone Mrs. C. and tell her Oliphant is coming – we'll say at four o'clock. That will give us time to work."

"Supposing they don't bite?" asked Mark.

"Then we'll have to try again."

"Supposing they *do* bite?" demanded Tennant.

Roger smiled. "That's optimism! You'll be at hand – there's a flat next to the Cartiers' which we can use – the tenants will be out, but I've had their permission to use the flat. Its lounge window is next to the Cartiers', and outside Bonnock House there are little balconies – a man of your agility can climb from one to the other. I'll be in the Cartiers' lounge and you'll be on the balcony – I'll leave it to you when to come in. They'll probably try to be violent, but that won't worry you! Er – have you ever jumped through a pane of glass?"

Tennant beamed. "I've jumped through everything!" he declared extravagantly. "I'll do my piece, don't worry."

"Good man! Well now – I'll have to be busy. As soon as the message is phoned to Mrs. Cartier I want her phone disconnected, and you've got to be installed next door—"

He continued, outlining his plans; and by half past three everything was settled. Then he telephoned the Yard, to learn that reports coming in from time to time showed no developments, except that Sloan had left a message to say that Abbott and Martin had left the Yard, and had gone to AZ Division – that part of the East End which included Rose Street and Leech's pub. Then, before he rang off, he was told that Oliphant had left his Chelsea house at three-fifteen."

"Good!" said Roger, with some warmth.

He was at Piccadilly when he made the inquiries and he drove immediately to Bonnock House. Crossing the heath – the quickest route – he remembered Dixon's story of its loneliness. He saw the tree-clad patches, the scrub and bushes and realised how suited the heath was to hold-ups.

It was a relief to know that Malone could not interfere this time.

He reached the Cartiers' flat at four-fifteen.

The maid who had reminded him of Pickerell opened the door and told him, a shade too quickly, that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Cartier was at home.

"Then I'll wait," Roger said.

"I don't think—" the maid began.

Someone in another room said: “No, I don’t!”

Roger smiled. “Take my card in, there’s a good girl, don’t make it difficult for yourself or me.”

The maid looked reluctant, but she took the card, approached the door from which the voices were coming and tapped, gingerly.

Carrier’s voice came promptly: “What is it?”

“Excuse me, sir, but—”

Roger, just behind her, put his hand to the door and opened it. He almost banged into Cartier, who was approaching. Behind Cartier was his wife, sitting on the settee where she had greeted Roger on that evening which now seemed an age ago. She looked startled; there was hardly any sign left of the rough treatment Malone had given her.

“What the devil—” Cartier began.

“I am a police officer,” Roger said, formally. “I would like you to answer a few questions, sir.”

“Why, West!” exclaimed Mortimer Oliphant, rising from an easy chair and smiling widely. “Well, well, how small a town London is!”

The solicitor’s interruption seemed to startle Cartier, who closed the door, shutting the maid outside. Mrs. Cartier extended a hand which Roger carefully ignored; that made her frown. Oliphant, well-dressed, smiling, handsome in his dark fashion, spoke heartily.

“I’d no idea that you knew West, Mrs. Cartier.”

“Only in the way of business,” said Roger. He glanced at the set tea table, seeing that there was early lettuce, jam, what looked like real cream and cakes and pastries. Mrs. Cartier rang a handbell and the maid appeared.

“Bring another cup for the Inspector,” said Mrs. Cartier. “You will have some tea, won’t you?”

“Thank you,” said Roger, formally.

“We were just discussing a remarkable thing,” said Oliphant, who seemed too anxious to talk. “I received a message asking me to visit Mrs. Cartier on Society business and she received one purporting to come from me – but neither of us sent such a message!”

Roger smiled. “No,” he said, “I sent them both.”

Cartier exclaimed: “Now look here, you may be a policeman, but I insist on—”

“Don’t get cross, darling,” urged Mrs. Cartier.

Oliphant said: “That’s a surprising admission, West.”

“Do you really think so?” asked Roger. “I knew that you and Mrs. Cartier did a great deal of business together and I wanted to have an opportunity of meeting you at the same time – I couldn’t think of any other way of arranging it. Sit down, Mr. Cartier, won’t you?” He smiled pleasantly. Oliphant was wary, Mrs. Cartier’s smile as obscure, and Cartier appeared to be really bewildered.

Oliphant demanded: “Is this visit official, West?”

“Haven’t I made that clear?” asked Roger, blandly.

“In that case—”

“But not necessarily aggressive!” Roger assured him. He settled back in his chair and waited for the maid to bring in another cup and saucer, knife and plate – as well as a small plate of bread and butter and some cake. When she had gone, he went on: “I think I ought to be frank with you, Mrs. Cartier. Your organisation has been used to hide the activities of a subversive organisation which—”

“But of course!” she said. “I told you it had!”

“I don’t think you realise quite how widespread an organisation it was,” said Roger. “We have been able to find most of the active supporters and many of the people who helped in the work, which was no less than the hiding of jewels smuggled into the country from Germany and Italy – nest-eggs for repentant Nazis!” He laughed as if it really amused him. “Unfortunately, we haven’t found who was really directing the organisation,” he said, “unless”—he had never sounded so bland—”it was someone in this room.”

“You have no right to make such slanderous suggestions!” snapped Cartier, but he turned on his wife. “From the very beginning I disliked the idea. If you had only had the sense not to interest yourself in such matters, this would never have happened!”

“Please, darling,” said Mrs. Cartier, “I don’t think—”

“You’re behaving very strangely, West, aren’t you?” asked Oliphant.

“Oh, yes,” said Roger. “How much did you know about it yourself?”

“I?” For the first time the solicitor looked really discomposed. “Are you suggesting—”

“Hasn’t your usual informant sent the warning?” asked Roger, gently. “Yes, Ohphant, you, personally. I have a warrant for your arrest. Also I have one for—”

“If you think my wife—” Cartier began, starting violently.

He knocked over his cup, which, fortunately, was empty. The spoon struck a salt cellar standing near the lettuce, and salt spilled over the table. “Damn!” ejaculated Cartier. He took a pinch of salt and threw it over his left shoulder, then went on: “If you have the impertinence to suggest that my wife was a party to this nefarious business, I shall insist—”

He went on and on, and Roger eyed him steadily.

In his mind’s eye he saw Cartier about to follow his wife and stepping into the road to avoid walking under a ladder. He had another picture of Cartier uncrossing dessert knives in this very room. He saw the man throwing salt over his shoulder.

Cartier stopped and Oliphant began to speak.

“Look here, none of this is helping,” Roger said, smiling. “Mr. Cartier, are you very superstitious? Did my meeting with Oliphant on the 13th of December really upset you so much?”

Cartier stiffened, Oliphant uttered a sharp exclamation – and then the room was very quiet.

Chapter 24

A MAN BRINGS A WARNING

Oliphant broke the silence, making a good display of being annoyed and yet pretending not to show it in front of Roger.

"I'm afraid West is getting rather beyond himself," he said; "if he has suddenly developed peculiar ideas about unlucky dates, we need hardly treat his visit seriously!"

Roger smiled. "Oh, but you should!"

"Infernal impertinence!" snapped Cartier, but his air of outraged innocence had quite gone and the wary gleam in his eyes matched Oliphant's. Mrs. Cartier sat back on the settee, her expression inscrutable. Glancing at her, Roger thought that no one would ever be able to do justice to her beauty. She was staring at her husband – and he wondered what was passing through her mind. "I demand a full explanation of this intrusion, Inspector, and an unqualified apology," Cartier declared.

Roger shrugged. "You're trying hard, aren't you?" he said. "Oliphant, we knew last night that you were up to your neck in it, but we waited for you to make some move. You didn't make it, so I forced your hand. I expected you to hear from your informant at the Yard, but he's been very remiss, hasn't he?"

"Oh, don't be a fool!" snapped Oliphant.

"I'm not being," Roger insisted. "I've told you that I have a warrant for your arrest – and Mrs. Cartier's. I can take Cartier away with me, too." He laughed at them all, but the only one who seemed unaffected was the woman. "I thought this little talk would clear the air," he added, cheerfully. "You see, before it's really finished, as far as we are concerned at the Yard, we want to find out who has been selling you information and who has been condoning your crimes. Who is it, Oliphant?"

"I have nothing to say, except that this is a grotesque distortion of your authority," Oliphant snapped.

"Who is it, Cartier?" Roger asked the other man.

"You must be quite mad!" Cartier exclaimed.

"You wouldn't know, Mrs. Cartier, would you?" asked Roger.

When she made no answer he went on: "It isn't working out very well. Let me be quite frank. Everything pointed to Mrs. Cartier but I had grave doubts about her because she first gave me reason to suspect the Society. The superstitions played a part, and when I saw a manifestation of quite childish prejudices on your part, Cartier, I wondered whether your hostility towards the Society was really sincere. I thought if I could get you all here together, with the telephone wires disengaged – it's easy, for a policeman – and we had a heart-to-heart talk, I might be able to put everything in order. If Mrs. Cartier has been an innocent victim of the conspiracy, far be it from me to

make trouble for her! Mrs. Cartier – you began to suspect what was wrong when you put in the dictaphone, didn't you? You hoped one day to find out whether your worst fears were realised. You knew Oliphant was in it, as well as Pickerell and Lois Randall, but you only suspected your husband's complicity."

"I—" began Cartier.

"Be quiet!" snapped Roger, but he was surprised when the man subsided and sat staring at him. "Mrs. Cartier," he went on, "you knew all that was being done, you knew that your husband – as well as yourself, of course – had friends all over the Continent. You probably started the Society to help those friends who escaped, as well as other unfortunates, but I don't think you had any desire to extend the scope of it. It was extended, however, and then you became afraid of it. You would not take any direct action until you were sure, but you wanted to be quite sure. You heard that I was being framed and so you came to see me, being very discreet and relying on my adding two and two together. Well, here's your answer. Your husband *was* in it."

"There is not a scrap of truth in anything you say," declared Oliphant.

Roger laughed. "Oh, come! I'm waiting here for the proof, you know. You've worked through one of the officials at Scotland Yard, that is definitely established. He will move, he's bound to, because he is afraid that when you are arrested you will betray him. He will come to warn Cartier to get away. He will be told that you, Oliphant, left Chelsea and came here and he'll be equally anxious to warn you. He'll know that in handling the matter I made a significant omission – I didn't have police protection at Bonnock House. He'll probably think that I can't handle it on my own."

"Perhaps he does," murmured Oliphani, but Roger ignored him.

"He'll be fairly confident because he has the authority to remove any police who might come to the flats," Roger continued; "that is one of his advantages, isn't it?"

Oliphant said in a queer voice: "Is it, West?"

"Oh, yes."

"And do you think you know this individual?" asked Oliphant.

"I do," said Roger.

"Perhaps," said Oliphant. "Perhaps you're right, West." He looked at Cartier and said with a twisted smile: "You were certainly right, Syl, the 13th undid us."

"Don't be—" began Cartier.

"There's no need to worry," Oliphant said, slowly. "West came alone – he was so anxious to make sure that his colleague didn't get suspicious, and he has great ideas of bringing off a *coup* by himself. He's here alone. I think we can handle him well enough. If he has a warrant for me, it will be executed, either by him or someone else." There was a curious smile on his face. "West is no fool, he knows that I have been a party to more than one murder – don't you, West? The police have a case for murder – against me – as an accessory. There's no hope for me, Syl."

"I'm glad you realise it," Roger said.

"But I may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb," said Oliphant. He put his hand to his pocket and drew out an automatic, levelling it casually at Roger. "If I shoot him," he said dispassionately, "that will put the finishing touches to the case, but you and Antoinette need not suffer. You can tell the whole story – how West thought you were in it, how he accused me, how I confessed to being the leader and how I shot myself after shooting him. It will be quite convincing, won't it?" He looked at Mrs. Cartier, and Roger, in spite of his own tension, saw with a burst of inspiration the reason for the man's attitude, one which had been premeditated for fear of such an emergency.

Oliphant was in love with the woman.

"Well, West, what do you think of your pretty scheme now?" Oliphant said.

Roger said slowly: "You told me that I wasn't sane."

"Meaning that I'm not? Oh, I don't know," said Oliphant. "It has lasted for a long time and I have been feeling the strain for several weeks. Nothing has worked out as I expected it, and this will probably be the most effective finish. Don't imagine that I am sacrificing myself for Cartier. I think it is the only way in which"—he drew a deep breath—*"everyone* can be happy."

The woman was looking at him, and Cartier said: "You fool, don't make such damaging admissions!"

"But it can't do any harm," said Oliphant; "only West is listening and he won't be able to talk – but his men will come before long." He stood up and backed towards the window, smiling. "Don't try to stop me, Syl, it will only be a waste of time. Curious," he added. "I wonder if it would have worked out differently but for your inhibitions? The unlucky 13th – it always frightened you, didn't it? And it seemed so easy to divert suspicion to West, and satisfy you as well as keep our Scotland Yard helper safe from suspicion. With West in jail, our real informant would have been quite safe, which was much more important than easing your mind about the 13th. But we don't need to tell West everything, he can fill in the details himself – in the next world!" Oliphant laughed, softly. "When our man comes from the Yard to warn us, he'll find West and me dead. You can tell him what has happened, and he will be able to wind up the case most satisfactorily. You'll point out, of course, that West came here alone *to try to extort more money*. You'll make it plain that he is the renegade after all, the dictaphone record was a trick. Then, later, you can probably start all over again."

He smiled and levelled the gun.

Roger thought: 'Hurry, Tennant, hurry!' He fancied that he had seen a shadow at the window, but was not sure. He wondered whether he had relied too much on 'unarmed combat' and the remarkable agility of Bill Tennant. Then he saw the shape at the window – Tennant was standing on the ledge.

Cartier gasped: "Oliphant, look—"

Tennant made no bones about it, but launched himself against the

window, breaking the glass with his elbows and knees, keeping his chin tucked well down; he wore a crash-helmet. The crash made Oliphant swing round, and Roger jumped to his feet and overturned the table.

At the same time there was a banging at the door, then footsteps in the hall. Tennant, with a scratch on his right cheek and another on his hand, fell upon Oliphant and the two of them hit the ground together.

The gun flew from Oliphant's hand; Cartier made a movement towards it, but his wife gripped his wrist.

"No," she said in a tense voice. "No, not that!"

Her cheeks had no vestige of colour. Roger looked at her, seeing this tense drama of human emotions as if he were standing a long way off. It made no difference to the issue, all but one thing was over, now – yet there was a fascination in the relationship between the man and his wife.

Cartier said: "*You* started it, you shrew! If it hadn't been for you this would never have happened."

The door opened and the maid, frightened and trembling, admitted Mark. Roger saw him but looked back quickly to Mrs. Cartier.

She said: "I couldn't let it go on, but – you'll be free one day. *Cheri,* don't do anything to let them hang you, you didn't know anything about the murders, they were not done by you: don't do anything to—"

Cartier struck her savagely across the face. She turned away and Roger put a hand on the man's shoulder. He had no pity for him and he hoped that nothing would save him from the gallows; he did not think it would be hard to prove his complicity in the actual murders, and that he had given the instructions for them.

Tennant was brushing himself down and Oliphant sat on the floor, looking up stupidly.

"Well, that didn't take long," Tennant said, wistfully. "Anyone else coming, West?"

"Soon, I hope," Roger said.

Neither Oliphant nor Cartier spoke again. Roger sent them, handcuffed to each other, into another room, with Mark and Tennant to watch them. He gave the maid careful instructions, then returned to the lounge. Mrs. Cartier was standing by the window, her face expressionless and her cheeks colourless. Roger looked out and saw one of Morgan's men at the street corner, just walking out of sight.

He wondered whether Abbott would come. He did not feel like talking, although he wished the woman would break the silence. Suddenly, she turned and took a cigarette from a box on the table. She looked at him levelly as he lit it for her.

"Thank you," she said. "Mr. West—"

"Yes?" said Roger.

"How long have you known that—my husband—was—concerned with it?"

"Not very long," Roger said.

"Did I so much as hint at it?" There was a fierce note in her voice.

“You did not,” Roger assured her; “you did all you could, Mrs. Cartier, to hide that. I wish—”

“Please!” she said, then went on slowly: “I have always been afraid of it, but what could I do, what *could* I do? He—*is* my husband.” She might have said ‘lover’. “I could not bring myself to believe it. Gradually, I learned what was happening, how they worked, what Pickerell did, what Lois Randall, *la pauvre!* was forced to do. Had it not been for the agonising fear that Sylvester was concerned, I would have told you before. When I learned about you—” she drew a deep breath. “You know what I did. I told him, also, to warn him. When he did not show any resentment I thought, I prayed, that I was wrong. But that record – the 13th – I knew how superstitious he was, how everything worried him – spilled salt, ladders – a hundred things.”

Roger said: “How much more do you know, Mrs. Cartier?”

“Not much more than you must know already,” she said. “Oliphant arranged most of it, I think. My—my husband knew the people whose goods were sent here. He was always friendly with those in authority in Germany and Italy, but so were many others. I knew a little of Malone. I learned much from cylinders which you have not heard: I hid them, but you will be able to use them now.” She went on tonelessly. “They built up everything, Inspector. There is one saying that the man Leech was to be killed, the ‘Chief had ordered it – always they talked of the ‘Chief’, never did they give him a name. I tried to pretend that there was hope even if it were my husband. I should have known better. I knew that Malone and his men were employed sometimes, that there was a policeman who gave information away – he has done so for several years. When it appeared that such a man was suspected, it was decided to make out that you were the man. That satisfied—superstition as well. Malone introduced this policeman to Pickerell, I do not know who it is.”

“Do you know where Pickerell is hiding?” Roger asked.

“No,” said Mrs. Cartier.

“You’re sure you’ve not heard the name of the policeman?”

“I have not,” said Mrs. Cartier. She drew a deep breath. “Do you think he will come?”

“I hope so,” Roger said.

There was so little more to learn, yet without the final revelation, success would be tarnished. Her statement: “. . . he has done so for years . . .” haunted him.

The woman fell silent. Roger stepped to the window and looked out – and, after a few minutes, saw a taxi draw up. Close behind it there came a private car. He saw Sam and another of Morgan’s men approaching, closing in as he had instructed. His jaw stiffened when he saw Abbott climb out of the second car with Tiny Martin. He could not see who was in the taxi, it drew up too close to the building. Abbott and Martin disappeared from his sight, another car, doubtless with Sloan inside, came down the street.

Morgan’s men waited.

Roger turned and looked towards the door. The waiting seemed unending but at last there was a tap on the passage door; the maid opened it and a man stepped through.

"Is Mr. Cartier in?" he asked.

"No," said the maid, repeating a lesson, "but Madam is in."

"It doesn't matter," the man said and Roger's mouth dropped. He did not want to believe the evidence of that voice. He knew it well, *but it was not Abbott's.* "As soon as your master returns, tell him to go north, as arranged. Do you understand? Tell him to go north. And tell him there is the possibility that someone will have to travel from Chelsea, also."

The maid said: "I will tell him."

"All right," said the man; his voice was unmistakable – it was Cornish!

Seeing him through a gap in the door Roger hardly recognised him, for Cornish had dyed his hair, was wearing a mackintosh with the collar turned up and looked disreputable. Only the voice condemned him. "Tell him to hurry," Cornish repeated.

There was a pause – then a gasp. Abbott's voice came: "Look out, Martin!"

A gasp from the maid was followed by hurried footsteps. Cornish pushed his way past her, slammed the door and then snapped: "The back way – tell me where the back door is!"

Chapter 25

THE END OF A HUNT

Roger stepped into the entrance hall.

Abbott was banging on the passage door. Another opened and Mark appeared on the threshold, with Tennant just behind him. Cornish saw them before he saw Roger. He put his hand to his pocket and snapped: “Stay where you are!”

“It’s no good, Cornish,” said Roger.

The man swung round. His mouth gaped open, his hand seemed to sag in his pocket. There was a moment of tense, utter silence before Cornish stiffened. Roger moved swiftly to one side, but he had never been more glad to see Tennant launch himself forward with his bewildering speed. Cornish fired once from his pocket, but the bullet hit the floor. Then he crashed down, but Tennant kept his balance and stood over his victim. He put his heel on Cornish’s wrist, forcing the gun away. Tennant kicked it aside.

Mark opened the front door, to admit Abbott and Martin.

“Well?” Abbott said, thinly. He looked at Tennant’s victim. “Is it—” he did not finish the question, but looked at Roger.

“I’m afraid so,” Roger said, painfully. “Yes, it’s Cornish.”

“I thought so from the time Malone tried to escape. Only Cornish could have given him that key.” It seemed an effort for Abbott to speak. “He went to Leech’s public house but didn’t come out as himself – Martin and I were watching and, deciding that he looked like Cornish, we followed him. So – we reach the end of the hunt, West?”

“Ye-es,” said Roger.

He knew, now, that there had been plenty of indications that it had been Cornish. Cornish had been transferred comparatively recently from AZ Division. When on the Division itself, he had worked only in the East End, where he had had ample opportunity of seeing Malone. The failure to keep constant guard at Welbeck Street had been his responsibility, the long time taken in tracing Dixon, were all explained. So was Malone’s confidence. And Cornish, after putting on an act, had been the first to offer help to him! Now, his motives were transparently clear.

Yet even that day Roger had not given the man a thought, although the fact that Oliphant did not know the developments should have been conclusive. Everyone at the Yard knew that Oliphant was suspect, yet Oliphant had not been told, because Cornish had spent most of the day away from the Yard, going to the East End straight from Cannon Row; he had not heard.

It proved, afterwards, that Cornish had telephoned the Yard several times and had eventually been told of the rumour about Oliphant. After that, he had acted quickly, not knowing himself followed. None of the Yard men had

been stationed at Bonnock House. Cornish had easily found out and had felt quite safe to come in person, as he could not reach Cartier on the telephone.

He tried, at the last minute, to save himself by making a complete confession. That, the dictaphone records and the other evidence made the case damning against him, Cartier and Oliphant. It was established that Lois Randall had been a victim of circumstances, precipitated by her own folly. Malone's part as the 'strong man' of the organisation was fully disclosed – ordinary theft had gone on side by side with the distribution from the Society.

Pickerell had been the intermediary. He had been approached by Cartier to handle the distribution, had known Malone, and had linked the two organisations together.

In Chatworth's office, late that night, Roger told his part of the story. Abbott was there, thin-voiced and aloof as ever; he had made little comment when Roger had told him that he had been suspected, except: "That's rough justice, West!" For him, the remark had been jocular.

"So we have it all," Chatworth said, with satisfaction, "and you didn't need to use Morgan's men very much, West. I must say you handled that part of it very well, even without Abbott you would have got him." He smoothed his fringe of hair, flattening it against the sides of his head. "What of the man Pickerell?"

"His body was found in Leech's public house," Abbott said.

"Do you know who killed him?"

"Malone did, before he left for Fulham. I think Pickerell was losing his nerve," said Abbott.

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Chatworth. "Well, West, you seem to have had the thick end of the stick most of the time. Not a nice story about Cartier. His wife—"

"She tried to divide her loyalties," Roger said, "she wasn't a party to it—"

"Oh, no. No case against her," Chatworth said, "and I shan't try to make one. Have you the full story of the Cox murder?"

"Cornish says that Cox murdered his wife and that there was no motive apart from that we already knew," said Roger. "Oliphant defended Cox because he was afraid of what the man might say, but Cox only knew the Malone end of the organisation. I once thought that Cox was drugged but I think I was wrong – he knew he would hang and saw no point in ratting on Malone. He believed that Malone was paying Oliphant, thus doing his best for him. Cox didn't know about Cornish; only Malone, Pickerell and Cartier knew him."

"Ye-es, they kept it close. Well," went on Chatworth, "we'll have a long job sorting it out. We'll have to find which of these people holding jewels for the Society knew *why* they were holding them, and we won't get many convictions. Still, we'll get the goods, which is the main thing – the helpers were more fools than rogues, I think. Is there anything else, West?"

"I don't think so, sir," said Roger.

"What about this girl, Randall?"

"We know how she came to get in with them," said Roger, "but we've had no statement from Malone or any of the others, they're too badly rattled to try to involve her. In any case, even if they did—"

"One of your troubles is that you're an incurable romantic," Chatworth growled, but his eyes were friendly. "Oh, you're right, West – one of these days you'll be right too often, it'll do you good to have a failure. Won't it, Abbott?"

Abbot considered. "It might," he admitted, frostily.

Roger smiled. "Very good of you to say I've never had one, sir."

"Eh?" barked Chatworth. "Who—" he broke off and laughed. "All right, West, you'll do! I hear that you've got some tidying up on hand at your house. Oh, that reminds me – the taxi-driver, Dixon?"

Roger grimaced. "He was used to try to make us concentrate on Mrs. Cartier and to head us off Cartier himself," he said. "I think it was that which first started me thinking of the man – Malone's effort to make Dixon implicate the woman was too clumsy. Malone was always too clever; I've never seen a man with such conceit."

"You won't see him much longer," Chatworth said. "All right, off with you!"

When Roger had gone, the A.C. looked thoughtfully at Abbott.

"What's your opinion of West?" he demanded.

"Much brighter than it was a week ago, sir," said Abbott, with thin humour, "but I always found it a trifle difficult to believe it of him. I ought to say this – the money *was* left at his house. Morgan did take it away."

Chatworth whistled. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," said Abbott. "The man who put it there has said so. Also, West asked a sergeant to trace two five-pound notes, which proved to be two of two hundred sent by Leech on Malone's orders. The balance reached us by post this evening – the wrapping paper is bare of prints. I suspect that one of Morgan's men posted it, on West's instructions.

"Hum." Chatworth looked over his glasses. "Can we really prove it? And if we can, do we want to? Morgan has been very helpful. West—" he broke off.

Abbott smiled thinly. "I don't think we can and I don't think we should, sir."

"Good!" declared the A.C. "Well you'll have to start clearing up, Abbott. Give West a couple of days to get over his home troubles and then get him busy, too."

Roger telephoned Wray and Tamperly, delighting the pressmen, and made a comprehensive report before he left the Yard. He was in his office when Abbott telephoned to say that he need not come in for a day or two. Roger put on his hat and coat and left the Yard. He drove to Bell Street, where he found Mark and Tennant sharing one spare room, the small room being occupied by Lois Randall, who, said Janet, was asleep. Dixon had gone. Janet was waiting in the dining-room and she looked a little crestfallen. It occurred to Roger that the wrecking had affected her far more

than she had let him think, but she brightened up as soon as he arrived and they found other things to talk about. Smaller things; they were laughing when they went to bed.

But for the restriction of newspaper space, the case would have been reported much more fully; as it was, the *Echo* and the *Cry* and their associated evening papers gave it as much publicity as they could. One of the Sunday papers tried to run a series of articles on Mrs. Cartier but it petered out because they could not get any information of great interest.

She gave her evidence, much later, against some of the men, but not against her husband. She was in court when the jury returned the verdicts, the black cap was donned and the sentences were passed. Then she left. Outside, she saw Janet and Lois.

She stopped and looked at them.

Janet smiled, uncertainly.

Mrs. Cartier approached her and shook hands and then hurried off, after telling Janet that she was giving up her Weybridge home. Just why she made a point of it Janet did not know then. A short time afterwards, Roger was able to tell her that the Society was working again, that Lois was reinstated as secretary – but as Lois Tennant, not Lois Randall – that Tennant was back in the north, training his rookies and, whenever he wrote, wishing wistfully that he could have a crack at the Huns.

Mark said that nothing would ever satisfy the repressed energy of that remarkably tough young man. Mark was busy compiling the record of the case, and he declared that but for his note-books the cases of Inspector West would never really be told to the world, so that he was not wholly useless.

The case was practically closed when, in midsummer, a furniture van drew up outside the Bell Street house. Roger was at the Yard and Janet opened the door. She thought that there must be some mistake, until she read the note that the foreman remover had brought with him.

"Roger!" breathed Janet into the telephone five minutes later. "Darling, it's incredible, but – Mrs. Cartier!"

"Well, what about her?" asked Roger, startled.

"She's sent us *all* the furniture from the lounge at her Weybridge house. She told me on the day of the trial that she was giving it up, but I didn't think anything of it then. Darling, it's *twice* as good as anything we ever had! I know the sentimental value isn't there but – *do* you think you could get home early and help me put the room straight? And shall I ask Mark to come?"

"Well, I'm—" began Roger, then drew a deep breath. "Yes, my sweet, ask him, and I'll be home by four, with luck."

When he rang down he looked very hard at Eddie Day, but even Eddie had the wit to realise that his thoughts were far away.

Series Information

Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication

Gideon Series

(Writing as JJ Marric)

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

	Title	*Also Published as:*	
1	Gideon's Day	Gideon of Scotland Yard	1955
2	Seven Days to Death	Gideon's Week	1956
3	Gideon's Night		1957
4	Gideon's Month		1958
5	Gideon's Staff		1959
6	Gideon's Risk		1960
7	Gideon's Fire		1961
8	A Conference for Assassins	Gideon's March	1962
9	Travelling Crimes	Gideon's Ride	1963
10	An Uncivilised Election	Gideon's Vote	1964
11	Criminal	Gideon's	1965

	Imports	Lot	
12	Gideon's Badge		1966
13	From Murder to a Cathedral	Gideon's Wrath	1967
14	Gideon's River		1968
15	Gideon's Power		1969
16	Gideon's Sport		1970
17	Gideon's Art		1971
18	Gideon's Men		1972
19	Gideon's Press		1973
20	Gideon's Fog		1975
21	Gideon's Drive		1976
22	Vigilantes & Biscuits	Gideon's Force	1978

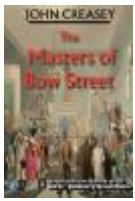
Other Series by John Creasey

Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication

'Department 'Z" (28 titles)
'Dr. Palfrey Novels' (34 titles)
'Inspector West' (43 titles)
'Sexton Blake' (5 titles)
'The Baron' (47 titles) (writing as Anthony Morton)
'The Toff' (59 titles)

along with:



The Masters of Bow Street
This epic novel embraces the story of the Bow Street Runners and the Marine Police, forerunners of the modern police force, who were founded by novelist Henry Fielding in 1748. They were the earliest detective force operating from the courts to enforce the decisions of magistrates. John Creasey's account also gives a fascinating insight into family life of the time and the struggle between crime and justice, and ends with the establishment of the Metropolitan Police after the passing of Peel's Act in 1829.

'The Toff' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

Inspector West Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

	Title	*Also Published as:*	
1	Inspector West Takes Charge		1942
2	Go Away to Murder	Inspector West Leaves Town	1943
3	An Apostle of Gloom	Inspector West At Home	1944
4	Inspector West Regrets		1945
5	Holiday for Inspector West		1946
6	Battle for Inspector West		1948
7	The Case Against Paul Raeburn	Triumph for Inspector West	1948
8	Inspector West Kicks Off	Sport for Inspector West	1949
9	Inspector West Alone		1950
10	Inspector West Cries Wolf	The Creepers	1950
11	The Figure in the	A Case for Inspector	1951

	Dusk	West	
12	The Dissemblers	Puzzle for Inspector West	1951
13	The Case of the Acid Throwers	The Blind Spot; Inspector West at Bay	1952
14	Give a Man a Gun	A Gun for Inspector West	1953
15	Send Inspector West		1953
16	So Young, So Cold, So Fair	A Beauty for Inspector West; The Beauty Queen Killer	1954
17	Murder Makes Haste	Insp. West Makes Haste; The Gelignite Gang; Night of the Watchman	1955
18	Murder: One, Two, Three	Two for Inspector West	1955
19	Death of a	Parcels for	1956

	Postman	Inspector West	
20	Death of an Assassin	A Prince for Inspector West	1956
21	Hit and Run	Accident for Inspector West	1957
22	The Trouble at Saxby's	Find Inspector West; Doorway to Death	1957
23	Murder, London - New York		1958
24	Strike for Death	The Killing Strike	1958
25	Death of a Racehorse		1959
26	The Case of the Innocent Victims		1959
27	Murder on the Line		1960
28	Death in Cold Print		1961
29	The Scene of the		1961

30	Crime Policeman's Dread	1962
31	Hang the Little Man	1963
32	Look Three Ways at Murder	1964
33	Murder, London - Australia	1965
34	Murder, London - South Africa	1966
35	The Executioners	1967
36	So Young to Burn	1968
37	Murder, London - Miami	1969
38	A Part for a Policeman	1970
39	Alibi for Inspector West	1971
40	A Splinter of Glass	1972
41	The Theft of	1973

	Magna Carta		
42	The Extortioners		1974
43	A Sharp Rise in Crime		1978

'The Baron' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

	Title	*Also Published as:*	
1	Meet the Baron	The Man in the Blue Mask	1937
2	The Baron Returns	The Return of the Blue Mask	1937
3	The Baron Again	Salute Blue Mask	1938
4	The Baron at Bay	Blue Mask at Bay	1938
5	Alias the Baron	Alias Blue Mask	1939
6	The Baron at Large	Challenge Blue Mask!	1939
7	Versus the Baron	Blue Mask Strikes	1940

8	Call for the Baron	Again Blue Mask Victorious	1940
9	The Baron Comes Back		1943
10	A Case for the Baron		1945
11	Reward for the Baron		1945
12	Career for the Baron		1946
13	The Baron and the Beggar		1947
14	Blame the Baron		1948
15	A Rope for the Baron		1948
16	Books for the Baron		1949
17	Cry for the Baron		1950
18	Trap the Baron		1950

19	Attack the Baron		1951
20	Shadow the Baron		1951
21	Warn the Baron		1952
22	The Baron Goes East		1953
23	The Baron in France		1953
24	Danger for the Baron		1953
25	The Baron Goes Fast		1954
26	Nest-Egg for the Baron	Deaf, Dumb and Blonde	1954
27	Help from the Baron		1955
28	Hide the Baron		1956
29	The Double Frame	Frame the Baron	1957
30	Blood Red	Red Eye for the Baron	1958
31	If	Black	1959

	Anything Happens to Hester	for the Baron	
32	Salute for the Baron		1960
33	The Baron Branches Out	A Branch for the Baron	1961
34	The Baron and the Stolen Legacy	Bad for the Baron	1962
35	A Sword for the Baron	The Baron and the Mogul Swords	1963
36	The Baron on Board		1964
37	The Baron and the Chinese Puzzle		1964
38	Sport for the Baron		1966
39	Affair for the Baron		1967
40	The Baron and		1968

	the Missing Old Masters	
41	The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait	1969
42	Last Laugh for the Baron	1970
43	The Baron Goes A-Buying	1971
44	The Baron and the Arrogant Artist	1972
45	Burgle the Baron	1973
46	The Baron - King Maker	1975
47	Love for the Baron	1979

Doctor Palfrey Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

Title	*Also Published as:*

1	Traitor's Doom		1942
2	The Legion of the Lost		1943
3	The Valley of Fear	The Perilous Country	1943
4	Dangerous Quest		1944
5	Death in the Rising Sun		1945
6	The Hounds of Vengeance		1945
7	Shadow of Doom		1946
8	The House of the Bears		1946
9	Dark Harvest		1947
10	The Wings of Peace		1948
11	The Sons of Satan		1948
12	The Dawn of Darkness		1949
13	The League		1949

	of Light		
14	The Man Who Shook the World		1950
15	The Prophet of Fire		1951
16	The Children of Hate	The Killers of Innocence; The Children of Despair	1952
17	The Touch of Death		1954
18	The Mists of Fear		1955
19	The Flood		1956
20	The Plague of Silence		1958
21	Dry Spell	The Drought	1959
22	The Terror		1962
23	The Depths		1963
24	The Sleep		1964
25	The Inferno		1965
26	The Famine		1967

27	The Blight	1968
28	The Oasis	1970
29	The Smog	1970
30	The Unbegotten	1971
31	The Insulators	1972
32	The Voiceless Ones	1973
33	The Thunder-Maker	1976
34	The Whirlwind	1979

'Department Z' Novels

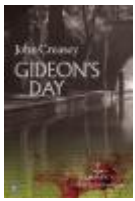
These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

	Title	
1	The Death Miser	1932
2	Redhead	1934
3	First Came a Murder	1934
4	Death Round the Corner	1935
5	The Mark of the Crescent	1935
6	Thunder in Europe	1936
7	The Terror Trap	1936
8	Carriers	1937

	of Death	
9	Days of Danger	1937
10	Death Stands By	1938
11	Menace!	1938
12	Murder Must Wait	1939
13	Panic!	1939
14	Death by Night	1940
15	The Island of Peril	1940
16	Sabotage	1941
17	Go Away Death	1941
18	The Day of Disaster	1942
19	Prepare for Action	1942
20	No Darker Crime	1943
21	Dark Peril	1944
22	The Peril Ahead	1946
23	The League of Dark Men	1947
24	The Department of Death	1949

25	The Enemy Within	1950
26	Dead or Alive	1951
27	A Kind of Prisoner	1954
28	The Black Spiders	1957

Select Synopses

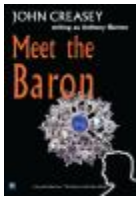


Gideon's Day
Gideon's day is a busy one. He balances family commitments with solving a series of seemingly unrelated crimes from which a plot nonetheless evolves and a mystery is solved. One of the most senior officers within Scotland Yard, George Gideon's crime solving abilities are in the finest traditions of London's world famous police headquarters. His analytical brain and sense of fairness is respected by colleagues and villains alike.

Gideon's Night
On this particular night Commander George Gideon has to deal with a couple of psychopaths who trail pain and blood in their wake. One targets infants, and the other young women on London's foggy streets. There's also an explosive gang war in the offing, and one way or another all of these cases are coming to their breathtaking conclusions at the same time. Can Scotland Yard's finest cope with such a nightmarish scenario, with what would ordinarily be months of time consuming police work crammed into just one night?

Gideon's Fire
Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard has to deal successively with news of a mass murderer, a depraved maniac, and the deaths of a family in an arson attack on an old building south of the river. This leaves little time for the crisis developing at home . . .

Meet the Baron
John Mannering (*The Baron*) makes

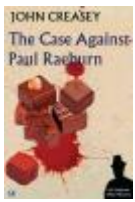


his first appearance in this volume. Lord Fauntley cannot help showing off both his daughter and the security under which his precious jewels are kept. Mannering finds himself attracted to both .... Money is tight and so he plans a burglary, but this fails and unexpected consequnces result. The relationship with Lorna Fauntley flourishes, and a series of high profile thefts and adventures ensure Mannering's future, so he believes, until Lorna equates him with *The Baron*. One of the many further twists in this award winning novel occurs when the police appear to seek Mannering's help, only to have everything turned upside down as the plot develops . . .

Shadow The Baron
John Mannering ('*The Baron*') is called in by Scorland Yard's Superintendent Bristow to help catch the mysterious jewel thief '*The Shadow*'. No one know the thief's identity, but he has managed to pull off many high profile robberies. However, as Mannering proceeds to track down the target, he finds the pursuer becomes the pursued . . . ..

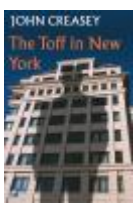
The House of the Bears
Standing alone in the bleak Yorkshire Moors is Sir Rufus Marne's *'House of the Bears'*. Dr. Palfrey is asked to journey there to examine an invalid - whom he finds has disappeared. Moreover, Marne's daughter lies terribly injured after a fall from the minstrel's gallery, which Dr. Palfrey discovers was no accident. He sets out to look into both matters, but the discoveries he makes are truly fantastic. A deserted mine, powerful explosive and a submarine all feature in this powerful mystery. The results are even capable of surprising him ...

Inspector West Takes Charge
Extortion is the name of the game, as one victim after another is ruthlessly targeted. Chief Inspector Roger West must now solve the problem, along with a tangle of murders - but the case becomes more frightening as every minute passes.



The Case Against Paul Raeburn
Chief Inspector Roger West has been watching and waiting for over two years - he is determined to catch Paul Raeburn out. The millionaire racketeer may have made a mistake, following the killing of a small time crook. Can the ace detective triumph over the evil Raeburn in what are very difficult circumstances? This cannot be assumed as not eveything, it would seem, is as simple as it first appears .....

Introducing The Toff
The Toff is the Hon. Richard Rollison; the ultimate sleuth who revels in solving crimes. Whilst returning home across the Essex countryside from a day's cricket at his father's Norfolk home, he happens upon an accident that sets him on a new trail. This involves murder, suspense and thrilling action as The Toff applies his mind with its usual precision and thoroughness.



The Toff in New York
'Say, Miss Hall, I hope that brother of yours hasn't run into any trouble.' But Will Hall had been kidnapped and the Honourable Richard Rollison, known by many by the apt if absurd soubriquet of the *'Toff'* is soon on the scene, but not before a murdered man had fallen into Valerie Hallís arms. There's lots of action in 'millionaire surroundings', with a rich private eye

and the NYPD all on the case, whilst the Toff tracks Dutch Himmy, surely the worst man in New York . . . ..

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